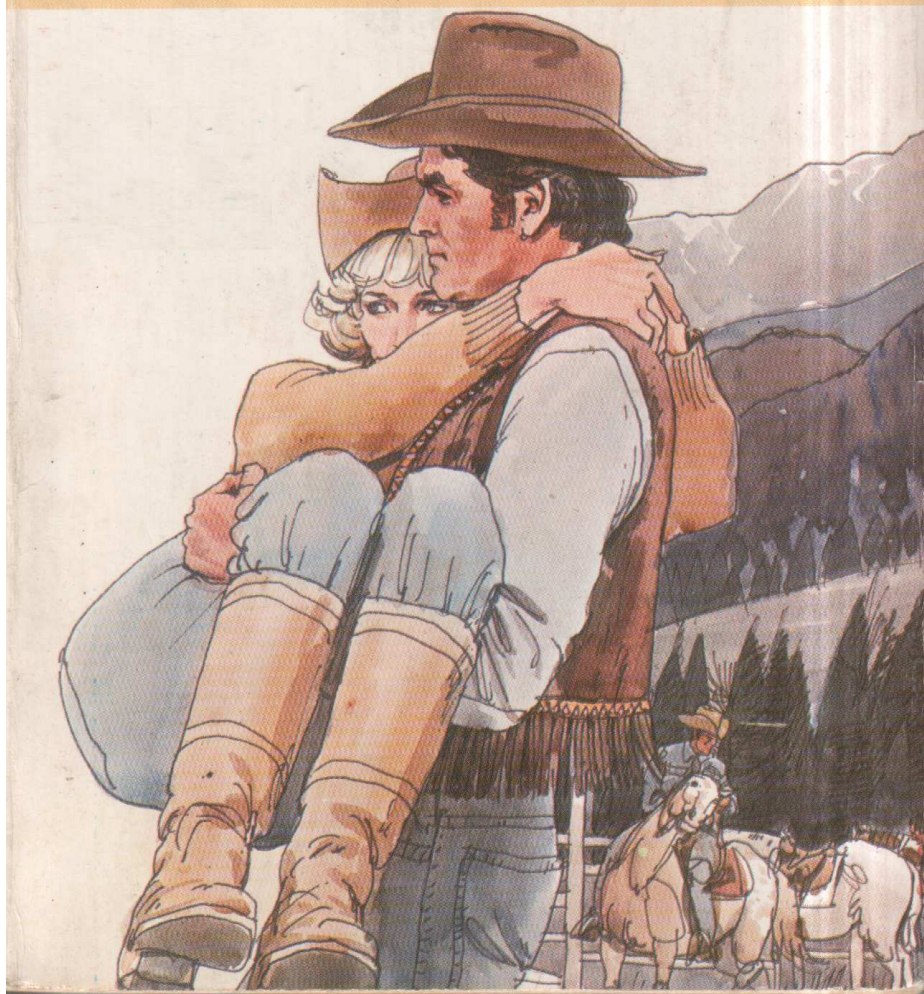


Mills & Boon

CANADIAN AFFAIR

Flora Kidd



CANADIAN AFFAIR

Flora Kidd

There were two pleasant 'extras' to Jessica's business trip to Canada - the chance of a holiday of a lifetime in that beautiful and fascinating country, and the possibility that her pleasant and friendly relationship with her boss, James Marshall, might develop into something warmer. Until she met Simon Benson, a man she knew she could easily love.

For after a brief but disastrous marriage, Simon made it plain that marriage was a relationship he could do without - and Jessica knew only too well that only hurt could come from expecting anything of him....

CHAPTER ONE

It was a perfect day for flying and for sight-seeing from the sky. All the way from Toronto Jessica had been able to look through the window beside her, down to the expanse of land far below, as a silvery jet plane carried her and many other passengers above, the provinces of Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Alberta.

Green and vast were the Canadian prairies, a seemingly endless plain of sunlit earth shadowed only by passing clouds. A long river snaked across them, sometimes bending back on itself to make bows of glittering, sky-reflecting water. Lakes were like drops of blue paint spilled on thick green paper and scattered towns were squares and rectangles of white and coloured dots drawn beside long straight grey lines which were the roads.

Above and to the side of the plane was a fantastic sky-shape. Clouds like icebergs, huge sheer cliffs of white vapour, sailed slowly by. In the distance other clouds resembling fairy-tale castles, turret upon turret, reared up against flat fields of white cloud which stretched as far as she could see.

The plane began to descend and suddenly the cloud-bearers and fairy castles were flushed with flamingo pink as they reflected the glow of the setting sun. A voice announced over the intercom system that passengers should fasten their seat belts and put out their cigarettes. It thanked them for travelling by that particular airline and hoped they would travel with it again.

Jessica turned away from the window, checked that her seat belt was fastened and pressed the button in the arm rest of her seat to bring the back upright. Looking round, she exchanged smiles with the blonde stewardess who was passing by and making sure every passenger had obeyed the instructions, and then nudged her companion gently.

'James, wake up, we'll be landing soon,' she said.

His head jerked a little, then came up. He took a long sighing breath and opened his eyes. His hand went up to push back the greying fair hair which fell forward over his high forehead and he turned to look at her.

'This flight always takes longer than I think it will,' he grumbled, sitting up straight and making sure his seat-belt was secure. 'And Canada is always bigger than I remember it being. I hope you haven't been bored.'

His concern cancelled out any, pique Jessica might have been feeling because he had slept nearly all the way from Toronto, just as he had slept nearly all the way from London to Toronto two days previously. He was James Marshall, highly qualified engineer and brilliant inventor, and for two years she had been employed as his personal assistant. They had been two fascinating, tumultuous years, during which she, had learned to work for and come to admire a man who had the uncertain, excitable temperament of a genius.

'No, I haven't been bored,' she replied with a smile. 'Don't forget this is my first trip out west, so everything is new to me. I'm just as likely to bore you with my rather childish exclamations about everything seeming larger than life-size. I'm still amazed at the extent of the land.'

He smiled back and patted her hand where it lay on the arm rest of the seat.

'I could never be bored with you, my dear,' he said. 'In fact I'm glad you're able to travel with me. You always give me a new slant on places with which I'm familiar.'

The plane was circling lower now. Jessica could see clumps of trees casting shadows beside red barns and farmhouses. Some horses, startled by the noise of the plane, ran swiftly across a green field. There was the glitter of many small lakes which seemed to take fire as they reflected the fiery red of the setting sun and then there were the tilting grey towers of a city, pinpricked with many lights. It was Edmonton, where James would deliver several lectures on new sources of energy to a conference of power engineers which was being held at the university.

Grass and trees went by in a blur as the plane landed, and soon they were saying goodbye to the steward and stewardess as they stepped off the plane into a carpeted corridor along which they walked to an arrival lounge to wait for their luggage.

There was an air of excitement in the green-tiled room and suddenly James was surrounded by a group of laughing young women! They were all dressed in the height of Edwardian fashion. Some were fashionable ladies in long tight-waisted dresses and beautiful wide-brimmed feathered hats. Others were dressed as can-can girls, their legs encased in long black stockings held up by flashy red garters which were revealed by the short bouffant skirts of their strapless black dresses. All of them greeted James with a hearty- kiss and welcomed him to Edmonton, then surged on to greet the next male passenger.

'What was all that for?' Jessica asked the flushed, rather embarrassed-looking James. 'Why are they dressed up like that?'

'I think it must be for the celebration of Klondike Days,' he replied, grabbing one of his suitcases as it appeared down the chute.

'Klondike? Wasn't that a gold rush many years ago?' Jessica asked, keeping an eye on the cases which were tumbling out.

'That's right. Edmonton, was the starting-off place for the prospectors and also the place where they returned to live it up if they'd struck gold or drown their sorrows if they hadn't. To celebrate it the people of Edmonton dress up and behave like Edwardians for ten whole days. I expect there'll be all sorts of entertainments and parades going on. Come on, let's go and grab a taxi.'

The sun had just slipped below the horizon as the taxi left the air-port and turned on to a wide highway. Soon the glinting grey towers of the city appeared high on the banks of a river and, by the time the taxi approached the hotel where Jessica and James were going to stay, and which was at one corner of a wide open square, all the streets were ablaze with lights and crowded with people who were seeking the entertainment James had mentioned.

In the lobby of the hotel Jessica sensed the sizzling excitement which she had noticed at the airport. From a distant room came the sound of can-can music being played on a jangling piano, seeming to set the scene for the chattering, laughing men and women coming and going in the lobby.

The women were mostly dressed in some version of Edwardian evening dress which accentuated their waists and revealed their arms and bosoms, making them look elegant and seductive at the same time. In smooth frock-coats, embroidered waistcoats, frilled shirts and sporting side whiskers or full-grown beards, every man looked like a bold-eyed Edwardian rake.

Click. Jessica blinked and looked again at the man who had just walked past her on his way to the reception desk where James was enquiring about their reservations. Here Was someone who wasn't dressed as an Edwardian but, as far as she was concerned, he was dressed up.

He was wearing blue denim jeans which were turned up at the bottom of the legs to reveal high- heeled boots made from tan-coloured leather and over an open-neck: shirt of navy blue and white checked material he was wearing a short denim jacket. On his head was a big white hat with a shallow crown and a wide brim which was curled up at the sides.

He spoke to a receptionist, then leaned an elbow on the desk and looked round the lobby while he waited for his reservation to be found. Slowly, his glance came round to Jessica. Narrow eyes in a lean wind-burned face surveyed her curiously for a moment.

Jessica looked away, but inevitably, almost against her will, her glance went back to him. He had turned to speak to the receptionist, so she was able to stare at the tough profile below the shadow of the hat-brim, at the slant of wide shoulders and at the muscularity of long legs shaping the jeans.

'You can always tell a man from Calgary by .his hat,' said an amused masculine voice behind her, and she turned to find that James was there with a tall florid- faced man, who was dressed in a grey frock-coat, pale grey trousers, a waistcoat which glittered with beads and sequins and whose frilled shirt was tied at the collar by a narrow black ribbon.

'I'm Brian Dawson,' he introduced himself, 'from Power Consolidated, the company which invited your boss to come to this conference. Welcome to Edmonton, Mrs Howard. We're delighted James has brought you with him.'

'Thank you. I suppose you mean the white hat that man's wearing,' she replied. 'Isn't it a stetson? The sort of hat people who work on cattle ranches wear?'

'You're quite right, but you'll find some of us wearing them just for fun. We buy them when we visit Calgary. Looking at that guy over there I'd say he's off a ranch and not wearing his for fun.'

'It's good of you to meet us, Brian,' said James;

He smiled. 'No trouble. Happened to be here with my wife and Tom and Molly Crawley. We're entertaining some of the other delegates to the conference. We're going on to watch the stage show at the Red Garter Saloon downstairs. It's Naughty Nineties, you know, can-can girls, that sort of thing. Like to join us? Say in about half an hour? Would that be long enough for you to change, Jessica?'

'Plenty of time.'

'Good. See you here in the lobby, then.'

A bellboy carried their luggage to a huge elevator which whisked them silently upwards. He seemed to be in fancy dress too, for he wore a high-necked tunic of Oriental design over narrow black pants and seemed to be Oriental in origin, judging by his slanting dark eyes and sleek dark hair.

They shared the elevator with the man in the white hat, who leaned casually in a corner, his hat brim tipped forward half hiding his face as if he didn't want to see anyone else in case he had to talk to them. Still fascinated by his hat, Jessica stared at him, and noticed that he didn't have much luggage, only a canvas holdall.

Their rooms were on the eighteenth floor and when the lift's doors slid open silently the man in the white hat got out first and strode off down the corridor to the right. Jessica and James followed their Oriental bellboy in the same direction, their *footsteps* muffled by the thick pile of the rust-red carpet.

They reached Jessica's room first, number eighteen- eleven. The bellboy unlocked the door, carried in her cases and put them on a rack at the foot of the bed, drew her attention to the bathroom and the closet for her clothes, then departed smilingly to take James to his room further along the corridor.

Alone. Jessica looked round the room with pleasure. It had a wide curving window covered with terylene net through which she could see lights strung along a roadway reflected back; from the dark water of a river. The furnishings were modern; a king-sized bed covered in blue and white damask, a small desk and chair, a big dressing table with wide mirror. The bathroom was decorated in blue and white tiles and had thick fluffy blue towels.

She unpacked quickly and went to wash. She piled her brown hair up on her head and pinned it Edwardian style, put a .choker of coloured beads round her neck, slipped into a dark red dress which had a low-cut neckline, a fitted bodice and a flared skirt and which she decided would fit in with the Edwardian gowns she had seen.

When she was ready she went out into the silent, scented corridor thinking to find James, only to realise as she walked along that she wasn't sure whether the number, of James's room was eighteen-twenty or eighteen-twenty-one.

She decided that it would be on the same side of the corridor as her room, so she walked past eighteen- twenty and knocked on the door of eighteen-twenty- one. When she heard a muffled masculine voice shout to her to 'come in' she tried the knob of the door, turned it, and went into the room. It was exactly the same as her room, even to the colour and design of the bedcover and the heavy drapes which framed the window.

Judging by the noise coming from the bathroom James was having a quick shower, so she stepped past the closed door of the bathroom

into the main part of the room and looked around for signs of his occupancy, for the briefcase and suitcase of matching dark brown leather which should have been on the rack at the end of the bed.

'You're in the wrong room, lady.'

The voice was quiet and slightly drawling, yet it had an unmistakable ring of authority and it made her jump. Whirling round, Jessica gaped in surprise at the man who had just stepped out of the steamy bathroom. Water dripped from his straight longish black hair on to his wide shoulders and made glistening rivulets among the rough black hair on his chest. A bath towel was draped round his hips.

Her glance leapt back to his face. His eyes were a clear crystal grey, surprisingly pale in such a swarthy face, and as she met his narrowed suspicious glance she recognised him. He was the man in the white hat.

'Oh, I beg your pardon! I thought James was in this room,' she exclaimed.

He lifted one dark slanting eyebrow and a gleam of elusive mockery softened his eyes.

'James?' he queried politely.

'James Marshall, my boss.'

'Why not try the room opposite, eighteen-twenty?' he suggested.

'Yes, I will, thank you.' She retreated to the door. 'I ... I'm sorry I walked in on you,' then she added, defensively, 'but you did call to me to come in and the door was unlocked.'

'I asked for a drink to be sent up. I left the door unlocked so the bellboy could come in while I was in the shower. I thought you were

room service when you knocked,' he replied coolly, stepping past her to open the door for her, a courtesy which surprised her.

Still feeling embarrassed by the incident, she stepped out into the corridor without another word and the door closed behind her. She went across to eighteen-twenty and knocked. After a while the door was flung open by James, who was dressed in a suit of silvery grey.

'Come and look at my room,' he invited with a laugh. 'It's palatial.'

It was almost twice the size of Jessica's room and was furnished in Edwardian style. Imitation oil lamps were attached to the walls and gleamed softly against a red and cream flocked wallpaper of big red roses. There was, besides the huge bed, a settee, an armchair and a big desk on which there was a reproduction of an old-fashioned telephone in ivory and gilt.

'It's big enough for the two of us, or a family,' said James with another slightly self-conscious laugh as they left the room. 'I hope you're not too tired for a party.'

'No, I'm looking forward to it,' replied Jessica. 'The whole hotel seems to be jumping with excitement and I wouldn't want to miss anything.'

Downstairs in the lobby Brian was waiting for them as he'd promised, and soon they were being introduced to his wife and to the four married couples who made up the party.

'It's great seeing you again, James,' said one of the women, who was called Molly Crawley. She turned and smiled at Jessica. 'Tom and I visited London just over two years ago, and James looked after us. How long are you going to be here? Long enough to visit the mountains, I hope.'

'I hope so too,' said Jessica. 'I've been wanting to see them for ages. You see, my grandmother was a Canadian. She was actually born in Edmonton, but lived for some years in a place called Clinton which is somewhere near the mountains. Do you know it?'

'Do I know it?' Molly's grey eyes twinkled merrily behind the thick lenses of her glasses as she chuckled. 'I sure do. We have a summer cottage not far from there. But tell me, how did your grandmother get to England?'

'She was a nurse in the First World War. She volunteered to go overseas with the Red Cross and she met my grandfather when he was recovering from a wound in a military hospital. After the war they got married and settled in England. My father was their only son.'

'Well, this is most interesting,' exclaimed Molly. 'You must have some cousins over here somewhere.'

'None as far as I know. Grandma was an only child. Her father was a clergyman and moved about quite a bit.'

'Didn't she ever come over to visit?' asked Molly.

'No. She didn't have the opportunity to come and ill- health prevented her from travelling as she grew older, but she always urged me to come.'

'What was her name before she married?'

'Simpson—Bluebell Simpson- She told me once her father's family had come originally from Scotland to farm in Alberta.'

'Just as mine did,' said Molly. 'And I can understand why your grandmother was called Bluebell if she had eyes as blue as yours

are—as blue as the bluebells which grow in the forests among the mountains.'

Jessica smiled. 'She did have blue eyes, and she was very lively and full of fun right up to the end. If she •was alive I know she'd be glad I'm over here at last, and she'd want me to go to Clinton and perhaps visit a lake where she used to go camping. Eagle Lake, she called it, and she said I'd have to go skyline-riding to reach it, so I suppose it's high up. I expect you know it, too.'

'I know of it, but I've never been riding a skyline trail myself. I'm not much use on a horse,' said Molly with another of her infectious laughs. 'But it was a woman trail rider who was the first white person to reach that lake. The Indians always call it the Magic Lake and are superstitious about it. They say a good spirit lives there.'

'Do you think it would be possible for me to go there? Are there horses for hire anywhere near?' asked Jessica.

'Yes, and guides.' Molly paused and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'How would you like to come and stay with me at our country cottage when this conference is over?' she asked abruptly.

Surprised by this sudden invitation from a person she had only just met, Jessica could only stammer,

'That's very kind of you ... but you don't know me!'

'And is that any reason why I shouldn't invite you to stay with me?' exclaimed Molly. 'We Westerners pride ourselves on our hospitality. We like to have people stay with us, especially people from other countries. Anyway, we know James and you're with him, so that's good enough recommendation for me. You weren't working for him when we were over in London, were you?'

'I... I was but I was away ... on my honeymoon,' replied Jessica stiffly.

'I'd noticed the wedding ring on your finger,' said Molly frankly. 'Your husband must be a very easygoing sort of man to let you come all this way with your boss,' she added, with a keen assessing glance at Jessica's face. 'Or has your marriage disintegrated already, like so many others these days?'

'Steve was killed in an accident on a construction site,' said Jessica faintly. 'We'd been married only four months.'

'Oh, my dear, I'm sorry,' murmured Molly contritely. 'Trust me to put my big foot in it! But it looks as if Brian is wanting us to go to the saloon now. How he loves to organise everyone! We'll talk to James about you coming with me to the mountains later, and I'll be seeing you on Friday for sure, when I have some of the wives who've come with their husbands to the conference to lunch at our house in Edmonton.'

The entertainment was held in a big room downstairs. It had been furnished to look like an old-fashioned Western saloon complete with swinging doors and a long mirror-backed bar. The audience sat at small tables set about the sawdust-covered floor. Music came from an old piano on which a small thin man in a bowler hat, a striped shirt and a fancy waistcoat played well-known ragtime music. Singing was done mostly by a tall full-breasted woman swathed in a glittering dress, and the dancers were a line of smiling girls who showed their black-stockinged, red-gartered legs in true can-can style.

When it was over Jessica and James said goodnight to the rest of the party and went up in the elevator to their rooms. Outside the door of Jessica's room James waited until she had unlocked the door.

"I think we made a good start to the conference tonight," he said. "I noticed you seemed to get on well with Molly."

"She's invited me to go and stay at their cottage near Clinton when the conference is over," Jessica said. "Do you think it's all right for me to go?"

"I think it's an excellent idea," he replied enthusiastically, "I know you want to see the mountains, and I've been wondering what would be the best arrangement. I want to go up north to see the tar sands development and it would fit in quite well if you could stay with Molly while I'm away. I'd pick you up from the cottage when I return, and we could drive down through the National Parks to Banff and on to Calgary and fly back to Toronto from there. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," she said with a laugh, then stifled a yawn with her hand. "Oh, I'm sleepy! Goodnight, James."

"Goodnight," he replied, and to her surprise leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek just as someone came along the corridor from the direction of the elevator. As James stepped back and turned away Jessica saw the man in the white hat walk by.

Jessica slept well but woke early, her inner clock not yet having adjusted to the difference in time. Seeing that it was light outside she leapt from bed and treated herself to the luxury of a shower and then prepared her clothes for the day. She chose a blue pants suit to wear. It had white stitching on the shoulder seams and the pockets and looked crisp and neat with a white shirt. She brushed her honey-brown hair until it shone, and held its long curving wave back from her face with a tortoiseshell slide. As usual her heart-shaped face

looked rather pale, but her large heavy-lidded blue eyes, by far her best feature, were clear and bright in spite of shortage of sleep.

Tempted by the sunlight to go outside, she went down to the lobby. Already there were people moving about the lounge and she had to step over the leads of television cameras and microphones which were being set up for the filming of a programme which was apparently going out live on television screens across the province. She lingered for a moment to watch some young people dressed up in Edwardian clothes arranging themselves on a settee and two chairs under the direction of the producer of the programme.

Outside the air was cool. The hotel entrance faced on to a big square. High buildings of pale stone and glass sparkled against a sky of pure serene blue. In a faint breeze flags in front of the wide building opposite to the hotel lifted lazily from their poles, and the leaves of the trees fluttered, their shadows dancing on the flat grey paving stones.

Enjoying the sunshine and the feeling of space and newness, Jessica crossed a wide street and wandered along, watching the people on their way to work. Some of the young Women were dressed in the Edwardian style, with full flaring skirts, feathered hats and boas, and often carried pretty parasols, but some were dressed in pants suits, much more practical in the cool freshness of the early morning air if not so attractive.

She turned back to the hotel in search of breakfast. In the lobby the TV programme was in progress and the young people were being interviewed for their opinions on Klondike Days, as far as she could make out. She went round the cordoned-off area and up a short staircase to the dining room which was on a gallery overlooking the lounge and lobby.

There was only one place left, at a table for two which was near the wooden railing edging the gallery, so while she waited for the waitress to bring her order, Jessica was able to watch the TV interviews.

'Excuse me, ma'am.' The voice was familiar, quiet, drawling yet authoritative. She looked up to see the man who had worn the white hat standing beside the table. 'I hope you won't mind if I share this table with you?' he asked politely.

'No, I don't mind,' she replied, hoping he hadn't noticed the surge of pink colour to her cheeks as she recalled the circumstances in which they had last met.

'Thanks.' He pulled out the chair opposite, sat down and immediately opened a newspaper which effectively screened him from her view.

She ate her bacon and egg and sipped her coffee. Occasionally she looked round, and saw that most of the people eating in the room were business men, well dressed in light summer suits, crisp-collared shirts and bright ties. Her glance came round to the man opposite. He had lowered his paper slightly and she could see the way his black hair curved across a wide forehead which had two thought lines running across it. His nose was long yet broad and flattened at the bridge, and was set between very high cheekbones. His wide mouth had firm well-shaped lips, but was spoiled by a slight cynical twist at one corner.

He looked up suddenly as if aware she was watching him. His grey eyes glinted like frost and studied her coldly for a moment before he looked down at his paper again, raising it a little in front of his face as if to shut but her interested stare.

The waitress brought his breakfast and went away. Jessica sipped more coffee and watched the TV programme. The interviewer was

talking to a girl who was wearing an old-fashioned, full-skirted riding habit and a shiny black riding hat.

The man at the table put down his paper and began to eat. Jessica felt the silence between them was embarrassing since everyone else at the other tables was, chattering. Was her embarrassment something to do with its being a table for two? Or was it because of the way they had met in his room last night?

Unable to stand it any longer, she did something which she had never done before in her life. She broke the reserve which usually walled her in and often made her appear aloof and superior to strangers.

'Do you come from Calgary?' she asked.

'Uh?' He was startled and his glance flashed up at her. 'Pardon me, I didn't catch what you said.'

'I asked if you come from Calgary. I noticed yesterday that you wore a big white stetson and I was told a man from Calgary can always be recognised by his white hat,' she explained.

His eyes, so clear and bleached-looking against his sun-bronzed, wind-burned skin, glinted with amusement. .

'That would be an Edmonton man talking to you,' he replied. 'There's a sort of love-hate relationship between the two cities and they tend to make fun of each other. No, I don't come from there, even though I wear a white hat. I guess you're from England, going by the way you speak. You came into my room last night, didn't you? I didn't recognise you at first. You look different with your hair down ... much younger.'

His comment brought the colour surging into her cheeks again, and irritated with herself for allowing him to disconcert her she returned to the attack.

'Which part of the province do you come from if you don't come from Calgary?' she asked.

'Near the mountains.' He spoke curtly and went on eating rather pointedly as if he had no wish to continue the conversation. The waitress came to offer more coffee. Jessica accepted more, although she knew she should be making a move to find James. Somehow this man's obvious desire to put an end to their conversation was a challenge, one she had to take up.

'Do you mean the Rocky Mountains?' she asked.

'Are there any other mountains around here?' he countered drily, giving her an ironic glance.

'No, I suppose not.' Then, determined to show she wasn't as ignorant about Alberta as he might imagine, she said, 'My grandmother was born in Edmonton. She told me a lot about the mountains.'

'When did she live here?' he asked with lazy indifference.

'Before the First World War,' she replied, and saw his eyebrows go up in mocking comment.

'Then she'd find a big difference in this city. It's changed fantastically in the past few years. Which part of England-do you come from?'

'Essex.' She saw that it meant nothing to him. 'Near London. I work in the city and travel there every day by train. Have you ever been to England?'

'No.' He went on eating, and that seemed to be the end of the conversation; again Jessica felt piqued. She wanted to know more about him and the only way she could think of to get him to talk about himself was to tell him a little more about herself.

'Don't you want to know why I'm here in Edmonton?' she said provocatively.

'I just reckoned you're here on a visit, maybe to see your grandmother's folks. Lots of people come from Europe in the summer to visit relatives who've settled here,' he replied equably.

'And do such people usually stay in hotels?' she challenged. 'I'd have thought they would stay with their relatives.'

He considered her with narrow eyes and then smiled slowly to show big, even, straight-edged teeth.

'Okay, I'll buy. What are you doing here in Edmonton, far away from London, England?' he asked.

'I'm attending a conference on energy,' she stated.

'Are you an engineer?' he asked, looking surprised.

'No. I'm the personal assistant to James Marshall, who's a leading expert in the search for new sources of energy.'

'Personal assistant,' he repeated slowly. 'Now what the heck does that mean? It could cover a lot.'

'It's a glorified name for secretary,' she confided. 'I see that he has the right papers, help him to compose his lectures, type his letters, make sure he catches the right plane and is in the right place at the right time.'

'I get it, you're a sort of comfort girl,' he drawled.

'Comfort girl?'

'Yes, the Japanese go in for them.'

That glint of mockery was back in his eyes and once more Jessica felt colour rising in her cheeks. He must have seen James kissing her goodnight in the corridor last night and as a result of what he had seen he was drawing conclusions—the wrong ones. It was her turn to withdraw and she sipped at her coffee, thinking it was time she made a move.

'How long does the conference last?' the man asked casually.

'Until Saturday.'

'Then you fly back to England?'

'No, I'm going to see the mountains,' she replied. 'I have two weeks' holiday due, so I thought I'd have it here. I suppose you're in town for Klondike Days?'

'No. I've come to collect my boy from hospital. He's been there for a few weeks. I'm hoping they'll let me take him home tomorrow.'

My boy. Somehow she hadn't thought of him as being married or as being a father. He seemed too self-contained, too aloof.

'Why is he in hospital?' she asked.

'He was thrown by a horse. He's had concussion and a couple of cracked ribs.'

'Oh, how painful for him! How old is he?'

'Ten,' was the curt rejoinder.

'Isn't that a little young for him to be riding the sort of horse that would throw him?'

'I don't think so,' he said stiffly, obviously disliking her implied criticism. 'I learned to ride when I was younger than that.'

She thought of his slightly bow-legged walk, looked at his hands and felt a faint tremor of shock go through her. They were strong and lean, sensitive rider's hands, but they were both scarred badly, and had white patches on them as if they had been burned at some time and had received plastic surgery.

'But then I expect you were born in the saddle,' she said, tearing her glance away from the tell-tale scars. 'Perhaps he wasn't.'

He stared at her, his eyes moving as they studied her eyes and then the rest of her face as if he were trying to understand what lay behind her remark. A slight frown pulled his eyebrows together.

'You know, you've put your finger right on the knot of the problem. He wasn't,' he said slowly.

His face had hardened, the generous curve of his lower lip had thinned, and realising that she had unwittingly touched a tender spot, Jessica looked away and saw James, his face set and angry-looking, coming towards the table.

'Jessica, what do you think you're doing?' he rasped. 'It's almost nine o'clock and we're due at the University in fifteen minutes. I've been looking everywhere for you.'

He was slim and trim in his light grey suit and white shirt and was wearing his college tie. With his waving fair hair shining and his

fine-featured pale face, he made the man sitting at the table seem very solid and somewhat earthy.

'I've phoned your room several times,' he went on angrily. 'I didn't bring you halfway across the world to spend your time drinking coffee and chatting to a complete stranger...'

'Now wait a minute.' The quiet drawling voice was suddenly steely. The stranger had risen to his feet, and although he wasn't taller than James, he was wider and much more muscular, and his slow deliberate movements held a subtle menace. 'This is a free country and there's no law against talking to a stranger if you feel like talking to one. If the young lady is late it's my fault. I delayed her.'

Which was an out-and-out lie, thought Jessica, as she gazed up at him in surprise and received a pleasant shock which made her heart leap in her breast. His light eyes seemed to be shining with secret mischievous laughter. Seeing it, feeling a sudden blaze of affinity with him, she smiled in response.

'See you around, Jessica,' he drawled. 'Have a good day.'

'He turned and walked away through the tables while James, who was still furious, plonked himself down in the vacant chair.

'Who was that man?' he demanded.

'I don't know. He was just a man having breakfast at the same table as I was. He's staying in the hotel. I've seen him before,' she replied coolly, feeling a little affronted by his manner.

'And talked to him?'

'Only this morning. As he says, there's no law against talking to someone. It seemed silly to sit at the same table and not to talk.

Besides, how can I learn anything about the place or the people if I don't talk to anyone?'

'But to talk to an absolute stranger is so unlike you,' he accused.

They both glanced at the cash desk where the stranger was paying for his meal.

'You don't know who he is or what he does,' muttered James. 'Look at the way he spoke to me. He was very rude.'

'I can't agree. In fact I think he behaved with chivalry,' retorted Jessica.

'With what?' James's exclamation caused heads to turn in his direction, and obviously annoyed that he had drawn attention to himself, he leaned forward across the table and added in a fierce whisper, 'Really, Jessica you re behaving most peculiarly! I thought you were much more contemporary in your outlook and didn't care for chivalry and all that nonsense. You've always said you regard yourself as any man's equal...'

'I know I have, and I still do, but that doesn't mean to say I like being spoken to in front of a stranger the way you spoke to me just now. Nor does it mean I dislike it when a man comes to my defence as he did.'

Exasperation tautened James's face and he pushed a hand through his hair.

'We haven't time to argue about it now,' he snapped. 'Are you ready to come to the meeting?'

'Yes, I am.'

There was no doubt that the incident had caused a certain amount of tension between them which was most unusual and they didn't talk as a taxi swept them through the streets of the city and out to the university campus on the south bank of the North Saskatchewan River, where the inaugural meeting of the conference was being held. The morning was spent listening to speeches made by members of the government and various representatives of the companies participating in the conference, and after a buffet lunch the delegates split into their various groups to listen to experts such as James present their ideas.

In the late afternoon Jessica returned with James to the hotel where she changed into an evening gown ready to go with him to the dinner and entertainment at the Petroleum Club, to which they had been invited by the representatives of an oil company.

It was late when they went back to the hotel and she was glad to go to bed because she was beginning to feel she had been up for days. She slept soundly until nine o'clock and after waking lay for a while luxuriating in the comfort of the big bed and the knowledge that the morning was all hers because James wasn't giving a talk until the afternoon, and provided she was on hand at noon to go with him to another session of the conference at the University in the afternoon, she could do what she liked.

For no reason at all she thought of the man in the white hat. Had the hospital allowed him to take his soil home? Perhaps if she went down to breakfast she might see him again and be able to ask him. She threw off the bedclothes and swung out of bed. Within twenty minutes, her hair shining and smooth and her blue linen dress neat and cool-looking, she was in the elevator on her way down to the lobby.

Since she was later than she had been on the previous day the dining room wasn't full and it was easy to see that the man who had shared

her table with her wasn't there. He didn't appear, although she kept watching for him all the time she was eating.

Feeling unaccountably disappointed because she hadn't seen him again, Jessica asked at the booth inside the entrance hall of the hotel for information about places of special interest in the city that she might visit for a couple of hours.

'Take a taxi to the museum,' suggested the woman at the booth.

'It's an attractive place to visit and you'll find it'll tell you nearly all you want to know about the people of this province. But make sure you're back here in time for the bands at noon.'

'Which bands?' asked Jessica.

'Different city bands will be meeting in the corner of the square to play—the fire department band, a couple of high school bands and an all-girls' band. It's a regular attraction during Klondike Days.'

The taxi took her, through sunny residential streets on the north side of the river this time, and dropped her within the grounds of the museum, a pleasant modern building which had been added to an older gabled house built of pale stone. In the spacious entrance hall where golden wood, white marble and wrought iron were beautifully blended, she was given a leaflet which showed a plan of the museum and gradually she found her way to the gallery which showed the development of the fur trade and exhibitions of various Indian tribes.

Fascinated almost as much by the way the Indian way of life that was presented as much as by the artefacts that were shown, Jessica lingered for a while, following a group of four women, two men and some, little boys.

'You can't see me in here.' The voice was a childish treble and looking down between two cases of exhibits she saw the whites of two eyes glimmering in the darkness of the gap.

'Yes, I can.' she whispered back. 'I can see your eyes and your teeth.'

There was a giggle and the child squeezed out of the gap. He had straight coal-black hair, a smooth brownish skin and big brown eyes brimming with laughter. Jessica smiled at him then and one of the men, whose profile was hawklike, came and spoke to the boy to scold him in a strange jerky language. He took the child by the hand and walked him off towards the four women, and Jessica realised they were all dark and had the same smooth brownish skin as the boy. All in modern dress, they were pointing and exclaiming at the feathered headdress worn by one of the life-sized Indian models in the exhibit. The profile of the model was the exact replica of that of the man who had taken the child away, and Jessica realised suddenly that the family were local Indians taking time to study and admire exhibits of their own past.

She moved on to another exhibit and became aware that someone else was staring into the glass case too. She glanced sideways and felt a quiver of recognition. Blue denim clothes, a white hat, a wind-burned face—the man with whom she had shared a breakfast table the day before.

He turned his head and looked at her. His eyes were cold and without expression.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hel-lo.' He drawled the word in imitation of her accent.

'We seem fated to meet, don't we?' she said rather foolishly. He didn't reply, just stared at her with those expressionless eyes.

'These exhibits are fascinating,' she continued nervously, wondering why she had this urge to speak to him. Maybe it was his silence, his cold hostile glance that did it. 'Don't you think so?'

'I suppose they are,' he agreed. 'Last time I was here the museum was still being built.'

'You must be very pleased with the finished product, it's a beautiful building.'

His glance came back to her face. His faint slow smile appeared and she had the oddest feeling that it hurt him to smile, as if he wasn't used to smiling regularly.

'I suppose I am. Museums aren't much in my line. I came here to fill in time.'

'So did I, but I'm enjoying it.'

They both turned to look at the exhibits again. Jessica wanted to go on to the next case, but she didn't want to leave him now that she had found him again.

'How is your little boy?' she asked, and he turned sharply to look at her, surprise showing in the lift of his eyebrows.

'They're going to let me take him home this afternoon, as I'd hoped.'

'I'm glad,' she said.

'You're really glad, aren't you?' he said with a note of wonder in his voice. 'You're not just saying that to be polite.'

'Of course I'm glad. What sort of person do you think I am?' she said spiritedly.

'Well now, that's hard to say,' he replied. 'You look smooth and you act smoothly, and in my experience women like that are empty inside, without any depth of feeling.'

Taken aback by his remark with its undercurrent of bitterness, as if his experience with women hadn't been particularly good, Jessica could only admit to herself that she had asked for it by her own foolish question.

'I always mean what I say, and I'm interested in and concerned about people,' she retorted.

'But why should you feel concerned? You don't know him ... or me.'

'That's true, but I once spent some time in hospital when I was a child and I can guess he must be miserable there so far away from you and his mother.'

'*Whoa!*' he rebuked her softly, as if speaking to a runaway horse. 'Danny doesn't have a mother.'

She flinched inwardly and looked quickly at the statue of an Indian brave. The face of the statue was daubed with coloured paint and the body was barely clothed. Feathers decorated the head and one arm was raised in a violent action. The statue was posed on a revolving stand and seemed to be dancing to the sound of the drumbeat being, played on a hidden tape recorder.

'I'm sorry,' Jessica muttered.

'You don't have to be sorry,' he said coolly. 'I was just putting you wise so you wouldn't go on thinking that Danny has been missing anyone. He's had a ball with all the nurses while he's been in hospital, and my guess is, that he's going to miss them when he gets back home far more than he ever missed me while he's been away.' .

She turned on him, her blue eyes sparkling.

'Now you're trying to make out that you're not a good father,' she accused, 'and I can't believe that.'

'Why can't you? Everyone else does,' he replied with a cynical twist to his mouth. 'Everyone who knows what happened to Danny will tell you that it was my fault he fell off the horse and that I was expecting too much from him as usual; that I'm too hard on him and expect him to be like me ...' He broke off suddenly, turning away and hunching his shoulders. 'But why the hell am I telling you this?' he muttered to the glass case. 'You're a stranger here.'

'Perhaps that's why,' Jessica said, and he half turned to slant her a wary glance over his shoulder.

'What do you mean?'

'Sometimes it's easier to confide a worrying problem to a stranger than it is to someone who's close to you,' she explained.

He turned fully to face her. His eyes were sharp now, interested as they studied her.

'How do you know that? Do you speak from experience?' he asked.

Her turn to glance away to stare at the exhibition of a typical Indian camp site, complete with wigwam and . models of squaws and children.

'Yes, I do,' she replied coolly. 'Isn't Danny like you?'

'No.' His answer was curt to the point of rudeness, pushing her away, rejecting her interest as she had just rejected his. 'Have you seen all you want to see around here?'

A change of subject, and she supposed it was about time. The conversation had become oddly personal for two strangers to be having in the gallery of a museum.

'I think so.' She moved on to the next exhibit which showed models of Indians dressed for some ceremonial occasion and wearing magnificent beadwork belts. Staring closely, Jessica could see that the beads were very small, mostly white, blue and red in colour, and had been arranged in formal geometric patterns.

She felt a movement beside her and glancing sideways saw that the man in the white hat had followed her, and was standing close beside her to look through the glass barrier at the models.

'The beadwork is amazing,' she commented, 'and that shoulder sash which the chieftain is wearing must have taken hours to make.'

'Indians are very patient people,' he replied. 'That's why they make good horse wranglers. They take time to understand animals.'

'There was an Indian family in here just now,' she said, 'and I was thinking how strange it was for them to be looking at the clothing their own people used to wear and the tools they used to use. When I realised suddenly that I've often looked at exhibitions in museums in England of clothing and tools made by my own people hundreds of years ago, and have never considered that it was strange to do so, and...'

'And you also realised perhaps for the first time that we all have the same origins,' he put in. 'And that the only differences between us have been caused by external influences, by climate and environment, by the necessity of having to adapt to survive.' He caught her glance of surprise and grinned suddenly. 'Sound like a professor, don't I?' he mocked. 'I'm actually quoting one I used to know. For a short while I attended the university here, and one of the

courses I took was anthropology. There I learned what I'd always felt to be true, that we're all the same race, *homo sapiens*, no matter what colour our skins are or what shape our heads are. It made me feel better.'

'Why?'

'Don't you feel better when one of your pet theories about life turns out to be right?'

'Yes, I suppose I do.' Her wide gaze lingered on his rugged profile. Like that of the Indian man she had seen earlier, it looked as if it had been hewn from hard rock, weathered by harsh winds, burned by a hot sun and scarred by frost.

He pointed to the necklaces spread out on the floor of the exhibition case.

Those were made by Stoney Indians who live in the mountains. They gather seeds from trees and plants and use them with the beads. See those silvery grey balls? Well, they're not beads but willow seeds, boiled until they're hard and then used as beads.'

'They're lovely,' Jessica said warmly, 'so delicate, and the colours are attractively blended. You seem to know a lot about Indians.'

'That's because I've lived among them and employ some of them.'

'Where? How?'

'On a ranch. Where now? Upstairs?'

Although she was a little disappointed that he had decided not to tell her more about the ranch, she agreed to go upstairs with him, pleased that she was to have his company, and they spent the next half hour studying a collection of Canadian birds and other animal life.

Eventually they wandered back downstairs through the lobby and out into the sunlight, dawdling along a path which wound past green lawns where sprinklers whirled incessantly. The land fell away to the river.

'Last time I was here I stood in the snow watching the ice running in the river,' he murmured.

Jessica glanced at the water which was now a sinuous green between banks of darker green. It was crossed by a bridge across which traffic moved in an endless stream, sunlight flashing on the chromium of cars.

'It's hard to imagine snow and ice on a day like this,' she said, lifting her face to the warm sun, to smell the scents of flowers which clustered in borders edging the lawns, 'My grandmother used to say she liked the mountains best in the winter, that they were more beautiful then.'

'They're beautiful at any season of the year,' he replied slowly, and looking at him she saw an expression of nostalgia in his face, a desire to be back where he belonged, away from the noisy glittering city.

She glanced at her watch.

'Oh, heavens, I'm late! I'm supposed to be back at the hotel at noon, and it's twelve now,' she exclaimed.

'How did you get here?'

'By taxi.'

'You won't be able to pick one up here. You'd have to phone for one. We'll go by bus,' he suggested practically.

The bus stop was outside the museum and they did not have to wait long for one to come. It was full, but the door opened and the driver let them on. Before Jessica could open her handbag her companion had paid the fare and they struggled up the steps to stand in the passage, between the seats and hold on to a bar that ran down the centre of the ceiling.

The bus lurched when it started off and Jessica was swung against her companion. She felt his strong body stiffen to support her and his hand go to her waist to steady her. His hand stayed there for a while until the bus stopped again and a seat became vacant and she was able to sit down. Then he stood close to her, occasionally bending to look through the window and point out something of interest to her.

The seat beside her became vacant. She moved over to the window and her companion sat beside her, his arm and shoulder solid against hers. They didn't talk any more, but the silence between them wasn't embarrassing or nerve-racking. It was alive with all sorts of unspoken messages so that Jessica found herself wishing that the bus journey could go on for ever.

But it came to an end at last and they stood on the edge of the sidewalk waiting for lights to change and stop the swift colourful stream of cars. Amber, then red. Her hand was grasped by a hard lean one and she was hurried across the wide street. The hotel loomed in the distance, a column of brown stone against the pale sky, its windows glinting like so many eyes. In front of it where two wide streets crossed each other was a mass of people crowding round to listen to the blaring brass and shrilling woodwinds of a band of young people playing martial music.

Still holding her hand, the man in the white hat pushed his way through the crowd, pulling her after him, and then they ran across another street towards the hotel entrance, laughing a little as they squeezed together into the same compartment of a revolving door.

'Jessica!' James's voice was sharp and disapproving. He was standing in the lobby near the door. 'Where have you been? I've been waiting twenty minutes!'

As she turned to face him her hand was released.

'Sorry, James,' she said, smiling, not feeling at all contrite. 'I've been to the museum and...'

She paused and glanced round. The man in the white hat was on his way to the elevator. The doors slid open. He stepped inside and, turning, looked across at her. He raised a hand in farewell and she raised her hand in a similar way. The elevator doors closed and it was only then that she realised that she didn't know his name.

'Jessica, wake up! We're late. Come on, there's a taxi waiting for us.' James sounded thoroughly exasperated and she turned to him again.

'But I must change,' she objected.

'No time. You'll do very well as you are. Now come on.' Taking hold of her arm, he turned her towards the revolving door and hustled her through it and into the taxi. As soon as they were seated and the door was closed the vehicle swept out into the traffic.

'I can't understand what's happened to you,' James grumbled petulantly. 'This is the second time you've kept me waiting in two days, and both times it's been for the same reason, that fellow dressed up as a cowboy.'

'He isn't dressed up. Those are the clothes he usually wears, I suppose. He owns a ranch,' she retorted.

'Oh, indeed?' James was at his most sarcastic. 'I suppose he spun you a tale about the vast areas of land he owns and the thousands of head of cattle he owns, and you believed him.'

'No, he didn't boast, but I believed what he did tell me.'

'I still don't understand why you've been hanging about with him,' he muttered.

'I haven't been hanging about with him,' Jessica protested furiously. 'Each time we've met it's been by accident. He was already at the museum when I got there. We talked about the exhibits, then we came back on the bus. I don't even know his name.'

'Yet he was holding your hand when you came into the hotel,' he remarked drily, and she stared at him in amazement.

'But it was only to help me cross the road and get through the crowds watching the band,' she protested. 'Oh, surely, James,' she added with a little laugh, 'you don't think we were holding hands like two adolescents who...'

'Quite honestly I don't know what to think,' he interrupted her rather, sharply. 'Ever since Steve was killed you've been so quiet, so reserved. I suppose I'm feeling jealous.'

'Jealous? You?' she exclaimed.

'Yes. Me.' His smile was wry. 'Does that surprise you? Just now, when you came through the door into the lobby of the hotel, you looked happy and carefree in a way I've never seen you look, like a bird that's been set free from a cage, and I'm jealous because someone else and not I had been able to make you look that way.'

Jessica looked out of the window. The taxi was passing along a quiet residential street. Large pleasant houses, mostly painted white, were set back behind manicured lawns where sprinklers sprayed glistening water: Dark evergreens, cypress and juniper clustered about the houses and bright flowers, petunias, salvia and marigolds blazed in

neat borders. The area had a comfortable, affluent atmosphere about it, as if the people who lived there had never lacked for anything in their lives.

'There's nothing for you to be jealous about,' she said woodenly. 'I haven't changed. It was just a brief encounter and it's, over. It meant nothing.'

'I see. I apologise for being so sharp,' he said, leaning forward and placing a hand over hers where they lay in her lap. 'I'm very fond of you, Jessica, and...' He paused as if searching for words and she waited, wondering why her heart wasn't singing because here was James holding her hand and admitting to being fond of her.

'And what?' she prompted, looking at him directly.

'I wouldn't like to see you hurt... again.'

'Don't worry. I won't be,' she replied coolly.

'Good.' He squeezed her hand understandingly and she glanced down curiously. Not -so very long ago another, different hand had grasped hers; a lean hard hand with a wide palm and strong tensile fingers; a hand darkened by exposure to wind and sun, yet badly scarred. And she knew a strange pang of regret because now she would never know what had caused those scars and would never know why a boy called Danny didn't have a mother.

CHAPTER TWO

DURING the next few days Jessica had little time to reflect on the episodes involving herself and the man in the white hat, or on James's unusual reaction to her brief encounter with a quiet enigmatic stranger. Caught up in the full swing of the energy conference, she attended meetings with James, took notes, typed them up for him, wrote letters for him, and attended social functions with him.

Only once, when she happened to notice a white stetson hat worn by a man passing by in one of the big shopping centres, did she spare a swift secret thought and smile for those three- meetings-by-chance and felt a sharp feeling of regret because she would never see him again.

The feeling alarmed her. Ever since Steve had been killed she hadn't allowed herself to feel too much and had lived each day as it had come, looking neither backward nor forward. For to look backward was to be swamped by melancholy as she remembered the tender, laughter-filled moments she had shared with Steve during the months of their marriage. And to look forward was to see only a grey future in which she shied away from any close emotional or physical involvement with a man because the abrupt ending of her relationship with Steve had frozen her emotions. She was afraid to love in case love was snatched away from her again.

So she smothered the feeling of regret and resolutely pushed the man in the white hat from her mind. It wasn't difficult, because she had plenty to do and see. The ten days of Klondike were almost over, yet Edmonton still echoed to the sound of brass, the shrill fluting of woodwind and the beat of drums as bands played in the square in front of the hotel at noon. Every evening she and James attended some form of entertainment offered at the exhibition grounds. Once they watched lumberjacks competing with each other at axe-throwing, log-chopping and tree-climbing, marvelling at their

strength and swiftness. Another time they listened to a well-known Canadian recording star sing the songs which had made him famous all over the world.

Friday came and with a group of conference wives Jessica went by taxi to the Crawleys' house for lunch. White and square, it stood back from the road behind sloping lawns and was shaded from the bright noonday sun by tall angular blue-green spruces and delicate twinkling silver birches. Elegantly Regency-styled sash windows were edged by green shutters and the front door was set under a portico supported by wooden pillars.

Hardly had the bell been rung than the door was flung open by a laughing, sparkling-eyed Molly. Behind her stood a group of women, all of them her neighbours and all of them dressed in the height of Edwardian fashion for the occasion. Jessica and the women with her were greeted with a warmth which made them feel at home at once. Introductions were made in the wide carpeted hallway before they all went through an archway into a long living room furnished with two flower-covered davenports, several armchairs and occasional tables made from golden maple wood.

The buffet lunch was served in the adjoining dining room which had a wide glass window door opening on to a stone-flagged patio screened by white trellis over which rambling roses and climbing geraniums tumbled. After helping herself to delicious creamed salmon, cold cuts of turkey and beef, tossed green salad and a hot buttered roll Jessica stepped out on to the patio and sat at a small round table. From where she was sitting she had a view of the back garden. A green lawn on which the inevitable sprinkler twirled, spraying the grass with water, stretched away to a clump of flowering shrubs over which drooped a graceful willow tree.

'So it's all fixed, then? You're coming with Cindy and me tomorrow to our place at Narrow Lake, while James goes with Tom to Fort

McMurray to see the tar sands development?' asked Molly, coming to perch on the edge of another chair by the table.

'That's if you still want me to come,' said Jessica.

'Of course we do. We're looking forward to having you with us. I'll pick you up at ten sharp from the hotel in the morning. I have to be in Jasper early in the afternoon to meet my niece, Rhoda Gerhardt, my sister's daughter. She's coming by bus from Vancouver and will be staying with us at the cottage. The four of us should have a nice cosy female time while the men are away—no one there to make any demands on us.' Molly's eyes twinkled knowingly. 'Do you think you'll miss James?' she queried.

'Not at all,' replied Jessica with a laugh.

'You and he are pretty close, though, aren't you?' probed Molly.

'He's been a good friend as well as a good boss,' Jessica admitted cautiously.

'And that's all?'

'That's all.'

'I'd say there's more to it than being your good friend and boss as far as he's concerned,' Molly went on drily, 'I'd say he's in love with you.'

'And you'd be wrong,' Jessica laughed incredulously. 'You can't be serious, Molly! James is in love with his work. He's engrossed in it to the exclusion of all else and always has been. He'd have married by now if he hadn't been.'

'He gives the appearance of being like that, I know,' replied Molly. 'But he has time for you and worries about you when you disappear

or behave unlike the cool organised secretary person he believes you to be. He told me all about what happened on Tuesday.'

Jessica was both amazed and indignant. She felt colour rise in a warm flush to her cheeks and concentrated on forking up the remains of the food on her plate so that she didn't have to face Molly's shrewd glance.

'All I did was visit a museum and was a little late in getting back to the hotel,' she protested. 'James may be my boss, but he has no right to dictate What I should or shouldn't do in my spare time.'

'I quite agree with you. As your boss he hasn't,' replied Molly, then sighed. 'Poor James, this is something beyond him. It can't be solved by mathematics. He's really glad you're coming to stay with me, you know, because he thinks you'll be safe.'

'He said so?' Jessica's blue eyes flashed as she looked up.

'Yes. "Keep an eye on her, Molly," he said to me. First time I've ever been asked to act as a chaperone,' Molly chuckled.

'Well, I hope you're not going to take your new role too seriously,' said Jessica lightly, trying to ignore her irritation. 'Keep an eye on me, indeed! Just who does he think he is? And whatever does he think can happen to me in a week?'

'I wonder,' said Molly, rising to her feet. 'Maybe he's afraid you'll get lost when you go on that trail ride you're planning to take to Eagle Lake. Now, come and help yourself to dessert. There are fresh strawberries and a chocolate mousse. There's coffee' or tea, whichever you prefer.'

It was ridiculous, James couldn't be in love with her, thought Jessica a few hours later while she rested on the bed in her room before she

made preparations to attend the last dinner party of the conference. What was more, she didn't want him to be in love with her. If he was it would mean 'she would have to change her job, dig herself out of the nice safe comfortable rut she had found; a rut she had expected to be in for a long time.

For. James to be in love with her would make a difference, and the knowledge that he might be made a difference to her that evening when she danced with him after the dinner and felt him draw her closer to him. In reaction she stiffened her arms slightly and deliberately held herself away from him. And when they returned to the hotel -and he bent to kiss her goodnight as he had every night they had been there she stepped back into the open doorway of her room, gave him a bright smile and with a murmured 'See you in the morning,' closed the door gently but firmly in his face.

She woke next morning with a sense of excitement and a feeling of being free. Going away to the mountains was *the* best thing that could have happened to her at this point in time. For six whole days, at least, she would be able to please herself, and if she felt like getting lost in the mountains she would get lost.

She was packing her clothes, folding and fitting them into her travelling bags, when there was a knock at the door. In response to her call James entered, more casually dressed than usual in a tan-coloured sports shirt and a beige-coloured leisure suit.

'Tom Crawley has just arrived, so I'm off,' he announced.

'I hope you have an interesting trip,' she said politely.

'Jessica,' he said, then broke off, frowned and turned away to the window and lifted the terylene net curtain to peer down at the river.

'Yes, James?' she said, folding a blouse and placing it in a bag.

'You'll be all right on your own?' he asked.

'But I shan't be on my own. I'll be with Molly and her daughter,' she replied calmly.

'Yes, I know. What I mean is, you will be all right without me, I suppose?' he persisted, turning back to look at her.

'Of course I shall. I've been all right without you before.'

'I know that too,' he replied with the slightest touch of exasperation. 'But this is a strange country and it's pretty wild where you're going. Anything could happen.'

'But won't ! Now stop fussing as if ... as if...' She paused, realising that what she had been about to say might hurt him.

'As if what?' he prompted, stepping towards her.

'As if you were my father.' She'd said it after all. Jessica saw him wince and felt a prick of remorse.

'Hmm, I suppose that's what I must seem like, a father anxious about his daughter. In fact over the last two years you've come to mean much more than that to me. Jessica, I didn't intend to speak to you about this yet...'

'Then don't,' she put in quickly, fearing what he might say. 'Let it wait ... until you come back from the north, or even until we get back to England.'

'But I've a feeling it will be too late then,' he answered earnestly, just as the phone rang. Automatically Jessica reached out and picked up the receiver.

'Hello,' she said, and watched James turn away to the door.

'Tom Crawley here,' said an impatient voice. 'James with you?'

'Yes, he is,' she replied clearly and brightly, blessing him briefly in her mind for interrupting at a difficult moment. 'He's just leaving, Mr Crawley, and will be with you in a few seconds.'

She replaced the receiver, and followed James to the door. He turned to her, his eyes narrow in his pale clever face.

'I'll see you next Thursday at the Crawleys' country place, and just make sure that you're there when I arrive and not gallivanting around the country with some stranger, or I'll...' He broke off with a wry grin.

'Or you'll what?' Jessica asked coolly, arching her eyebrows at him.

'I don't know,' he said with a sort of diffident helplessness, 'play the heavy father, I suppose. 'Bye, Jessica, and take care.'

Molly arrived, just as she had predicted, at ten sharp in a blue station wagon. When she opened the rear door to put Jessica's cases in the space at the back two white dogs with pointed ears and heavy shoulders came forward to grin at her, their pink tongues lolling.

'Meet Toby and Prince,' said Molly. 'They're huskies.'

'Oh, I've read about them,' said Jessica. 'Don't Eskimos use them to pull sleds through the snow when they go hunting?'

'That's right. You get in now and sit by me. Cindy is in the back seat with Gin, our Siamese cat,' said Molly.

Cindy was about eighteen years of age and had shining pale blonde hair framing a chubby serious face. Her eyes were round and a clear placid blue.

'We'll go along Jasper Avenue,' said Molly as she swung the car out into the stream of traffic. 'It will give you a last glimpse of the river before it turns south. It's some great river, that Saskatchewan, and has seen a heap of history. The first people to come this far west came along it in their canoes, they were fur trappers. Edmonton and Jasper, the town we're heading for now, both started off as trading posts for the trappers.'

'What exactly was a trading post?' asked Jessica, looking out at the big shops which lined the street and at the shoppers already thronging the sidewalks.

'It was usually a house or a hut where the trappers took their furs to a trader,' replied Cindy, leaning forward. 'They were owned by the big trading companies like the Hudson Bay Company or the North West Company.'

'Cindy loves history,' Molly said proudly, and Jessica turned to smile at the girl.

'Any heroes in your history, Cindy?' she asked.

'You bet there are,' replied the girl with a grin. 'The men who opened up this country were all heroes.'

'Do you have a favourite?'

'Yes, David Thompson. He was an apprentice in the fur trade and he explored the rivers in a canoe. He mapped out a large part of the West and was probably one of the greatest land surveyors the world has ever known. He married an Indian girl and they had a big family,

but unlike most of the white traders and trappers who took Indian women as their wives, he didn't desert her later. He stayed with her. He was a sort of quiet hero. He didn't show off or talk a lot about himself.'

'Jessica's grandmother used to live in Clinton, Cindy, and told her about Eagle Lake. Do you know how she could get there?' enquired Molly.

'Go to the Lazy R and hire a horse and a guide. Joe Trip, the trail boss there, knows the mountain trails like the back of his hand,' asserted Cindy. 'I wouldn't mind going with you, Jess—I hope you don't mind me calling you Jess—Jessica is such a mouthful.'

Jessica laughed. 'No, I don't mind. And I'd love to have your company if we can arrange that ride.'

They had left the city behind. The road lay straight and grey in front of them, pointing to a misty blue horizon bounded by the curves of low green hills. On either side were flat fields where ragged-looking alder trees clustered about the few wooden houses.

'We call this the Evergreen route,' explained Molly. 'When I was a girl we Used to come and fish and swim in the lakes around here, and if anyone had a sailboat we'd sail it. We used to pick saskatoon berries and fox berries in the fall, and mushrooms, all the time looking out for a bear which we'd been told had killed a man when he was hunting.'

Slowly the heavy morning mist was clearing from the sky. Pale sunlight glinted on the damp surface of the road. Signposts flashed by, bearing the names of places which could be reached down side-roads —Alberta Beach, Lake Isle, Chip Lake and more romantically, at least for Jessica, some Indian names; Wabanum, Nakamun and even a place called He-Ho- Ha.

On and on the road went through the green country which changed slowly from flat fields to gently rolling land covered with trees. They stopped at a wayside restaurant to eat hamburgers and french fries, and drink piping hot coffee from thick cups in a big room filled to capacity with chattering tourists from luxury streamlined buses which were parked outside.

Cindy took over the driving and Molly sat behind. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the road began to slope upwards. Trees, tall and stiffly angular with thin dark trunks and stiff green needles grew down the side of the hills to the edge of the road. Lodge pines, Molly called them.

'We're getting there, Jess,' she added excitedly. 'Soon you'll be seeing the giants. Look, there's the Athabasca River. It'll be with us most of the way to Jasper.'

The water of the river was milky as it reflected the silvery silt of its banks, and suddenly ahead were mountains, fold upon fold, rearing up against a bright blue sky, some pale pink and ridged with erosion, others a deep purple, dark and mysterious with their backs to the sunlight.

'That one sloping up to the left is Folding Mountain,' said Molly, 'and the overpowering grey cliff is Roche Miette, called after one of the *voyageurs* who's supposed to have climbed it.'

Overpowering. The description fitted exactly, thought Jessica as she sat in a stupefied silence and watched pyramid after pyramid of rock rise up before her, each sharp summit seeming to stab the soft blue sky with its sharp edge. Some were so high that they were topped with patches of snow even though it was July.

Overwhelmed, she glanced away, sideways to the river. Bars of shimmering gravel and silvery grey driftwood, islands fringed by

willow and spruce were scattered across its milky green waters. It widened into a lake, dark green with plant life, thick with reeds and the skeletons of dead trees. Looking back, Jessica gasped, for it seemed that the mountains had closed in behind them, cutting off escape, ridge upon ridge of limestone, pale yellow in the light of the afternoon sun.

The road turned south into a wide green valley. On either side lush meadows sloped away to dark forests. Ahead a wall of grey rock, solid and severe, layered with snow and ice, soared up against a billow of white cloud.

'That's Mount Edith Cavell, called after the famous nurse of the First World War, the one who helped so many people escape from the continent to England,' said Molly, 'And soon we'll be in Jasper.'

The town, cradled among the hills, was crowded with hikers and tourists. Cars cluttered the streets. In a small park where colourful flowers blazed red and orange in borders and trees cast shade, a group of hikers sprawled on the grass to rest and listen to a young man playing a guitar and singing to himself.

They found a parking place by the station and walked to the totem pole where they had arranged to meet Rhoda. 'The totem pole was carved by an Indian chief who lived on Queen Charlotte Island on the west coast and was brought here in 1915,' Cindy explained to Jessica. 'If you face the way the raven on it faces you'll see over to the left the mountain which looks like a man asleep, called Roche Bonhomme.'

Jessica faced the way the raven faced, looked at the mountains, at bare grey rock shimmering in the sunlight above the tree-crowded lower slopes, smelt the fine clean air and felt joy spring within her. She was here at last, among the mountains so long remembered by her grandmother.

'Hi, Aunt Molly. Hi, Cindy. Oh, it's good to see you both!'

Rhoda was tall and slim. Her dark hair had a bluish sheen to it and her fine brown eyes sparkled with laughter. She was smartly dressed in a pants suit of grey pin-striped flannel.

'Hi, Rhoda, it's good to see you after all this time.' Molly embraced Rhoda affectionately. 'I'd like you to meet Jess Howard. She's here on a visit from England. I hope you two are going to hit it off. Too bad if you don't, because you're sharing a bedroom at the cottage.'

Back in the station wagon they drove out of the town in a southerly direction, turning off to take a road which cut through the mountains towards the east to meet a wide highway that ran north and south among rolling forested country.

'How do you like being back from your stay in Kenya?' Molly asked Rhoda.

'Kenya was great, I loved it, but I guess there's no place like home,' replied Rhoda.

'So Vancouver is home, now, is it?' teased Molly.

'You know what I mean. It's in Canada,' said Rhoda.

'No desire to return to Edmonton?' persisted Molly.

'It depends.'

'On what?'

'Oh, on what happens this summer, I suppose,' replied Rhoda casually. 'That's a new sign over the entrance to the Lazy R ranch, isn't it?' she remarked as they passed an opening in a wire fence

which ran along the side of the road and. enclosed wide stretches of pasture land. 'Anyone ever see anything of Simon these days?'

Haven't seen him for ages,' said Molly.

"What about you, Cindy?"

'I saw him last summer,' said Cindy, 'A friend and I went on the ride to the Tonquin Valley.'

'How was he?' demanded Rhoda.

'All right, I guess. Simon doesn't talk about himself at all. He's a sort of quiet hero too.'

'You and your heroes,' scoffed Rhoda. 'What about the child? Is he like Lou?'

'I dunno. I can't remember Lou very well,' said Cindy. 'I'm not sure if I ever saw her.'

'She was a strawberry blonde and had brown eyes.'

'The boy has reddish-brown hair and tawny eyes. Not a Bit like Simon,' said Cindy.

Losing interest in the conversation, Jessica gazed out of the window. The rolling green meadows seemed to go on for ever, and beyond them the dark battlements of the mountains seemed to dwarf everything else.

A signpost informed them that it was two miles to the town of Clinton and that Narrow Lake was to the right. Molly braked and turned right to follow a narrow dirt road which seemed to plunge downwards so that the mountains ahead of them again seemed to grow higher and higher.

The lake appeared at first as a faint blue haze among the encroaching green of the land, but as they drew nearer to it Jessica could see it was rimmed by pale sand. It deserved its name, for it was long and narrow. The road curved round it to the right, passing two houses both set among tall pines and birches. Another curve, and Molly turned the car off the road and along a winding driveway to a long low rambling building built of wood.

'You call this a cottage, Molly?' exclaimed Jessica teasingly. 'Looks like a mansion to me!'

'Well, it was once just a log cabin, built by my great-grandfather as long, long time ago. When my father sold the farm we kept it and a few acres of land and I guess the cabin just grew as the family grew,' replied Molly. 'Now, don't forget we all carry our own stuff in. There are no bellboys or handymen around, and until the boys arrive and Tom and James get back from up north, this is a strictly female operation.'

The warm golden gleam of pine panelling gave the interior of the house an atmosphere of relaxed cosiness. Furniture was plain and comfortable, made from the same golden wood. A long living room with a verandah took up the whole of the front of the house, and on its shelves books and hand-crafted Indian ornaments shared space with hunting rifles and fishing rods.

The room which Jessica shared with Rhoda was at the back of the house, looking on to the forest, and when she awoke the next morning she stared hazily at the window, wondering for a moment where she was, surprised to see a small greyish animal with a pointed face and beady eyes peering in at her. When she sat up suddenly, startling it, the animal turned and she saw it had stripes down its back and a strong wiry tail.

It disappeared, and glancing across at the other bed Jessica saw that it was empty. Even while she wondered where Rhoda had gone the door inched open carefully and Rhoda appeared carrying a cup and saucer. She was dressed in a pretty flowered caftan-style housecoat, and her dark hair, released from the chignon in which she had worn it the previous day, rippled over her shoulders.

'I know all about you English,' she said gaily as she crossed the room to Jessica's bedside. 'You like to be wakened with a cup of tea.'

'Thanks very much,' said Jessica, 'but I thought this was to be a strictly do-it-yourself holiday, and none of us is to wait on any of the others.'

'So Molly says,' retorted Rhoda, sitting down on the edge of the bed, 'but I wanted to wake you up and I thought this would be the most diplomatic way of doing it. I've a suggestion to make. Want to hear it?'

'Go ahead,' invited Jessica, sipping tea.

'Why don't you and I go over to the Lazy R ranch this morning to fix up that trail ride you want to make? Eagle Lake is a good distance up in the mountains and it's going to take at least four days to get there and back, so if you want to do it before Friday the sooner you make the arrangements the better. The trail boss likes to know a few days in advance, usually, how many horses will be needed and how much camping equipment he should take.'

'It sounds a good idea,' agreed Jessica. 'How do we get to the ranch?'

'In the station wagon. Molly will let us have it.'

'Maybe Cindy would like to come with us.'

'Not she,' returned Rhoda. 'She's gone fishing already.'

'Well, what about Molly?'

'If I know her all she'll want to do is lounge on the verandah and read a romantic novel. That's her idea of a holiday. How about it, Jess? Shall we go?'

'All right. What shall I wear?'

'Shirt and jeans. What else? Could be we'll go riding this morning.'

Within half an hour they were driving north along the highway, Rhoda at the wheel. She drove with a slick efficiency which Jessica envied, and it wasn't long before they were turning under the swinging wooden sign of the Lazy R.

'The ranch house and corrals are a long way from the road,' said Rhoda as they bumped along and the wheels churned up clouds of dust.

'Nothing is hear in this country,' said Jessica with a laugh. 'Distances are incredible.'

'After England it must seem enormous to you, yet distance never stops any of us from visiting. I've known friends drive miles and miles through the snow in the winter to go to a party.'

'Why is the ranch called the Lazy R?' asked Jessica, looking out at some brown and white bullocks that were grazing beyond the wire fence.

'Because the land was granted to a man called Dan Roberts who came from Ontario in a covered wagon. He was the father of Rose Roberts, grandmother of Simon Benson who now owns the ranch.'

'Rose Roberts!' exclaimed Jessica. 'My grandmother used to talk about her.'

'I daresay she did,' agreed Rhoda. 'Rose was quite a legend in her own time, and anyone who lived in these parts at the beginning of the century would know about her. She was a great horsewoman at a time when a horse race was part of every picnic and sports day. She could compete with the best and win. She was an only child, wilful and a little spoilt, as popular on the dance floor as she was on the race track with young men. But there was one man she couldn't seem to win over.'

'Who was that?'

'Her father's top rider, Sam Benson. He came out of nowhere one day with a string of horses from the south which Dan Roberts bought from him. Sam stayed on at the ranch to train the horses, and from what I've heard Rose apparently fell in love with him, head over heels.'

'But he didn't fall for her?" asked Jessica.

'Not obviously. From all accounts he was a wild, shy man. Some say he was partly Indian and that could be why he had a way with horses. Anyway, one day, frustrated because she couldn't get beneath his skin, Rose challenged him to a race and in the course of it her horse fell and she was thrown. She was badly hurt, crippled for the rest of her life.'

'And what did Sam do?' Jessica was fascinated.

'Showed his true colours—married her, and when she inherited the ranch from her father ran it for her until he died.'

'Are there many ranches about here?' asked Jessica, who was thinking suddenly of a man in a white hat whom she had accused of being born, in the saddle.

'Not many here. This was originally a horse ranch until Grant Benson, Simon's father, introduced some cattle. The really big cattle ranches are further south and west of Calgary, in the foothill country. Well, here we are.'

The vehicle came to a stop in front of a sprawling wooden single-storeyed house surrounded by hayfields, which stretched away to the timber-covered slopes of a mountain. Both house and outbuildings were red and had red roofs.

Rhoda turned off the engine of the car and honked the horn. No one appeared, so they got out of the car and stood for a moment in the hot sunshine, hearing the sound of a bull bellowing and the thud of horses' hoofs.

Round the corner of the house came a small man. He was wearing a red and black checked shirt, scuffed blue denim pants and boots with spurs which jingled as he walked. A large brown hat with a high crown and stiff broad brim made it impossible to see his face and seemed to make it impossible for him to see them, because he turned up the wooden steps leading to the verandah of the house without saying anything.

'Hey, you,' shouted Rhoda, 'is Simon Benson around here?'

The man paused on the top step, squinted down at them from under his hat-brim, then came slowly down the steps. His face was like crumpled brown leather and his eyes were slightly slanted and a dark opaque brown.

'What 'ja want him for?' he asked in a soft voice.

'To arrange a trail ride into the mountains,' said Rhoda.

'He's in the corral, back of the house. He's giving the boy another riding lesson.' The man shook his head from side to side and his dark eyes brimmed with laughter. 'He's wasting his time.'

He turned away and pounded up the steps to the house again and disappeared through a door.

'Come on, Jess,' said Rhoda with an excited lilt. 'Let's go and watch the riding lesson too.'

She went off at a run, a lithe shapely figure in her jeans and taut white blouse. *Jessica* followed more slowly, passing from bright sunlight into the shadow of the house. Someone had made a garden at the back. There was a patch of grass edged by a border of purple and white petunias. Washing pegged on a line lifted lazily in the warm wind which blew down from the mountains; men's checked shirts, denim pants, coloured underwear and socks.

The corral was circular, made from poles wired together to make a fence. Beyond it spruce trees stood like bluish-green sentinels and beyond them the land rose to the rocky ramparts of a mountain which seemed to touch the sky.

There was movement in the corral. A horse was trotting round it. On its back was a small rider in a checked shirt and a small-sized white stetson hat. On the corral fence sat a man who was also wearing a white hat.

'That's Simon,' whispered Rhoda. The smooth tanned skin of her face had a glow to it and her dark eyes gleamed with mischief. 'Let's creep up on him. I think he's going to be very surprised to see me.'

Finger to her lips, she advanced on tiptoe. After a moment's hesitation *Jessica* followed. Somehow the slant of the man's shoulders and the tilt of his hat looked very familiar to her.

The small rider drew rein beside the man to listen to an instruction. His attention strayed from the man. He looked through the gap between the top two poles of the corral fence, saw the two tiptoeing women and cried out.

The man stiffened and turned slowly, steadying himself on the top pole of the fence. From under the brim of his hat his grey eyes stared in surprise. For Jessica recognition was instant yet silent. In many ways she had been expecting this meeting.

'Hi, Simon.' Rhoda sang out cheerfully. 'Remember me?'

'Rhoda!' he exclaimed, and swinging his legs over the fence dropped lithely to the ground and stepped towards her. 'But you're supposed to be in Africa... or was it South America?'

'Kenya, which is in Africa. I came back last month and I've been living in Vancouver. Aunt Molly invited me over for a holiday, and I jumped at the chance to come and see you. Simon, why didn't you ever answer my letters?'

His shoulders lifted in a shrug and a slow rueful grin curved his mouth.

'Writing isn't in my line,' he murmured evasively. His grey glance strayed to Jessica. 'Who's your friend?' he asked coolly.

So he wasn't going to acknowledge that he had met her before, thought Jessica. Well, that was all right with her. It would save having to make a lot of complicated explanations to Rhoda.

'This is Jess Howard, a guest of Aunt Molly's.'

The narrowed grey glance was icy, more hostile than ever, and it froze the hand she had been about to offer him at her side.

'Hi,' he said curtly, and she nodded in answer.

'Jess wants to go to Eagle Lake and we thought you might be able to arrange a ride up there, provide horses and a guide,' said Rhoda brightly, coming to the point at once.

Simon Benson leaned against the fence and shoved his hat back on his head, and a few locks of black hair fell across his forehead.

'Eagle Lake, eh?' he said thoughtfully. 'That's a long way. Take two days at least to get there. Have you done any riding before?' The question was shot at Jessica along with another narrowed, icy glance.

It was one subject they hadn't touched upon when they had talked at the museum, just as he hadn't mentioned his name and she hadn't mentioned Eagle Lake.

'Yes, I have. In England,' she said quietly.

'This would be western saddle.' There was the slightest of sneers on his face, as if he doubted her ability to adapt to a different saddle, and it roused her.

'I've always been taught to believe that good horsemanship is more important than the type of saddle used. It's universal,' she retorted, lifting her chin.

He gave her a long level look but didn't say anything.

'Hi! I'm Danny.' The boy had stood up in the stirrups to peer over the top of the fence, and was obviously tired of being ignored. •

'Hi, Danny,' said Rhoda genially. 'Why don't you come out and show yourself?' -

'I'm having a riding lesson,' he muttered sullenly.

'Going to be as good a rider as your dad?' said Rhoda.

'No, I'm not,' the boy blurted tearfully. 'I hate horses, I hate riding. I fell off and hurt myself, but *he* said I had to get back on a horse again so I wouldn't lose my nerve.'

'Well, he's quite right,' replied Rhoda. 'Did you fall this morning?'

'He was thrown a few weeks ago,' said Simon coldly. 'Okay, Danny, you can dismount. Take Crackerjack to the stable and unsaddle him as I've shown you and turn him loose in the home pasture.'

He pulled open the gate of the corral and the boy slipped to the ground and led the horse through. It was a fairly big pony which looked docile enough, in spite of its explosive name.

'Last time I saw you, Danny, you were a baby,' said Rhoda. 'Your mum was a friend of mine. We used to live next door to each other when we were girls. I'm Rhoda.'

The boy pulled off his big hat to show a mop of reddish-brown hair. His big golden eyes squinted in the sunlight as he looked first at Rhoda and then at Jessica.

'Did you know my mum too?' he asked Jessica.

'No, I'm sorry I didn't,' she replied. Considering the boy's delicate pink and white face and his large timid eyes, she could agree with Cindy, the child was not at all like his father.

'Go and unsaddle, Danny,' ordered Simon.

'I... I can't.' The boy's face crumpled and he looked again from one woman to the other with wide appealing eyes.

'What do you mean, you can't?' snapped Simon.

'The saddle is too heavy. I can't lift it down.'

'I'll come and help you,' offered Rhoda, who had obviously fallen for those big eyes.

'Like hell you will,' said Simon sternly. 'He's got to learn how to do it himself.'

'I know, but not yet, Simon. He's so small,' pleaded Rhoda.

'Go on, Danny.' Simon's voice crackled like a whip. 'Move!'

This time Danny obeyed without hesitation; turning on his heel and pulling the pony after him, he set off in the direction of the big red barnlike building.

'I'll go and watch him, even if I'm not supposed to help him, you big bully,' said Rhoda, making a face at Simon, and went after the boy.

Shading her eyes against the blinding brilliance of the sun, Jessica watched Rhoda go. She was half tempted to follow to escape from the hostility which seemed to vibrate like an electric current from the man to her.

'Now perhaps you'll tell me how you found out I live here.'

The cold severity of his voice startled her, and she gave him a wary sidelong glance as she grappled with the implication behind his suggestion.

'And don't give me that rubbish about us being fated to meet,' he added sneeringly. 'Fate didn't organise this meeting.'

Although seared by the caustic remarks, Jessica showed nothing of the outrage she was feeling but returned his narrowed livid glance with a calm one of her own.

'No, ray grandmother organised it,' she retorted with a touch of flippancy.

'That lady sure comes in useful,' he jeered. 'How could she organise anything if she's no longer alive?'

'I'm here because she used to live in Clinton. Her father was vicar at the Anglican church there and I think she probably knew one of your grandmothers— Rose Roberts.'

His hard light eyes widened briefly, then narrowed sceptically again.

'Ah, come on,' he scoffed. 'That's stretching it a little too far.'

'But it's true,' she insisted. 'If you don't believe me, go and ask at the church next time you're in Clinton. Ask if there used to be a vicar called Alan Simpson there. Ask if you can see his grave, because he was buried in the churchyard there and his name is on a plaque on the wall near the altar.'

She was glad to see the expression of scepticism fade from Simon's face. But the hostility was still there in his eyes as he stared at her, and it was to that hostility that she reacted suddenly, furiously.

'Why did you think I'd come?' she demanded hotly, and then when he didn't answer immediately she swept on, words tumbling out of her. 'Oh, I suppose you think I found out your name and address at the hotel and followed you here. You've such an inflated idea of your own attractions that you believe I'm chasing you! Well, nothing was further from my mind. I'm not like that. I don't go in for man-hunting.'

'No?' The lift of his dark finely-marked eyebrows was derisive.

'No!' She spat the word at him and her breast heaved with the tumult of her feelings. 'And I don't know where you got the idea that I do.'

'It was quite easy,' he retorted. 'First you stared at me an uncommonly long time in the lobby at the hotel and in the elevator, then you barged into my hotel bedroom unannounced while I was taking a shower...'

'That was a mistake, honestly it was, and I only stared at you because I'd never seen anyone wearing a hat like yours before,' she interrupted him. 'Don't you realise that everything here is new to me, different, so I'm bound to stare a bit? Anyway, you've got to admit that I didn't *invite* you to sit down at the same table for breakfast,' she added.

'True. But if I'd recognised you I wouldn't have sat down at that table,' he replied coldly, so coldly that she felt as if he had thrown icy water in her face and she gasped. 'And it was you who started the conversation, both at breakfast and the museum. You didn't *have* to speak to pie.' He lifted his shoulders in a dismissing sort of shrug. 'I guess I don't care much for pushy women.'

That was the last straw. Never in the whole of her life had Jessica felt an urge to slap anyone's face. But she felt that urge now, longed in fact to feel her hand cone into hard contact with his lean sardonic cheek and she was forced to grip her hands tightly behind her back in case one of them became uncontrollable.

'I am not pushy,' she said between her teeth. 'And I wouldn't have spoken to you, only ...' She broke off as she remembered why she had spoken. His cool enigmatic aloofness had presented a challenge to her which she had been unable to ignore.

'Only what?' he promoted, and his eyes shimmered like silver between their black lashes as he narrowed them against the sun's brightness.

'I wanted to know more about you,' she admitted honestly. 'There's nothing wrong, is there, in being interested in another person?'

He lifted his hat from his head, wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and replaced the hat. pulling the brim forward so that his eyes were in shadow.

'Depends on what's behind the show of interest,' he said drily. 'You see, when I saw you with Rhoda...' His glance flicked past her and he stopped speaking. His mouth tightened grimly as if he regretted his remark. 'When would you like to go to Eagle Lake?' he asked stiffly. He had withdrawn again, and now she would never know what had passed through his mind when he had turned and had seen her standing with Rhoda.

"As soon as possible," she replied coolly.

'Any other people want to go with you?'

'Only Rhoda and Cindy Crawley.'

'What about your boss, James Marshall?'

'He isn't with us, but he'll be here on Friday, so I'd like to go to the lake and be back before he comes.'

Simon leaned his shoulders against the corral fence, and hooked his thumbs in the wide hand-tooled leather belt at his waist. There was an insolent indolence about his stance which drew attention to his well-knit muscular physique, and she was suddenly acutely aware of him on a physical level and felt her heart quicken its beat.

'I suppose you won't want him to know you've run into me again,' he drawled. 'If he does find out he'll think we had it all planned to meet behind his back, and you'll have a hell of a time convincing him he's wrong.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Jessica. 'I never thought of that.' She stared at him. He had summed James up very accurately considering he had only come into contact with him twice. 'You don't like James, do you?' she accused.

'I haven't got as far as having any feelings about him,' he replied lazily, 'but you must like him a lot to have left your husband to travel halfway across the world with him.'

So he had noticed the rings on the third finger of her left hand and he had drawn conclusions again, the wrong ones.

'I haven't left my husband,' she retorted. 'He ... he I ... I'm a widow.' She'd said it and it hadn't hurt any more. Was it possible that the healing time was over? Two years, her mother had said it might take her to recover from the pain inflicted on her by Steve's death.

'You seem kind of young to be that.' Suspicion and scepticism were still there in his narrowed glance. He pushed away from the fence and stepped forward to stand before her, his thumbs still hooked in his belt. She returned his suddenly interested stare unflinchingly. 'It's an approach I haven't come across before,' he added insinuatingly. 'And I suppose you think it gives you something in common with me, a basis for forming a beautiful friendship, perhaps?'

Again the urge to slap him leapt along her nerves to tingle in the palm of her hand, and she turned away from him quickly, her breath catching in her throat. She actually saw red as she faced the brilliant rays of the sun. She would have walked away, back to the station wagon without another word, but Rhoda and Danny were there and from behind her the man called out,

'Well, Danny, how did you make out?'

'Fine. Auntie Rhoda helped me.'

'Aunty?' Simon's voice was scornful. 'You don't lose much time, do you, Rhoda?'

'Not any more,' retorted Rhoda brightly. 'I wasted enough time in the past. Have you fixed up the trail ride?'

'Not yet.'

'Then whatever have you two been talking about?' exclaimed Rhoda, her brown eyes darting suspiciously from Jessica to Simon and back to Jessica. 'Not the weather, surely,' she added with a touch of sarcasm.

'Jessica and I have been getting better acquainted,' said Simon mockingly, and Rhoda's dark eyes glinted with hostility as they searched Jessica's face again. 'About the trail ride,' Simon went on coolly, 'I suggest you leave here early Sunday morning. With good weather and no accidents you should be back by Thursday evening. Joe Trip will guide you and I can spare Al Curtis to go along too, and help with the camping and the cooking. Having Cindy with you should be a help. She's a great one to ride trail with.'

'But couldn't you come instead of Al?' asked Rhoda, turning to him appealingly. 'It would be like old times if you would. Remember the fun we used to have when you used to ride with Lou and me...' Rhoda clapped a hand to her mouth as she gasped with dismay. 'Sorry, Simon,' she mumbled.

'What for?'

'Reminding you of Lou,' Rhoda whispered contritely.

'Haven't you realised I'm reminded of her all the time just by looking at Danny?' he countered drily. He turned to Jessica. 'Tomorrow morning okay with you?' he asked curtly.

'Yes, of course. Do we have to provide anything?'

'Sleeping bags, change of clothing, fishing equipment if you want to fish. Cindy will tell you what else to bring. We'll provide tents and cooking utensils and most of the food, How long is it since you went riding last?'

'Over two years.' She and Steve had gone pony-trekking while on their honeymoon in the Lake District.

'Then it wouldn't be a bad idea if you and Rhoda went riding now. It would give you a chance to get used to that saddle we were talking about earlier and break you in gently. Otherwise you're going to suffer agonies of saddle-soreness, on your first night in the mountains.'

'Terrific,' said Rhoda enthusiastically. 'It's some time since I was on a horse too. Why don't you come with us?'

Simon turned to her impatiently.

'Look, Rhoda, I suppose I should be flattered by your request for my company, but things are different here from what they were ten years ago. I'm the boss here now, not just the boss's son with time to go riding the trails with every visitor who comes along. This isn't a dude ranch. It's a working ranch, and I have to see that the work gets done.'

'My, my, you have changed, haven't you?' Rhoda scoffed, but there was a tremble in her clear voice and her face was clouded with disappointment. She looked at Danny, who was idly scuffing at the earth with the toe of one boot and apparently not in the least interested in what was going on. 'Danny,' she said softly, 'would you like to come trail riding with Jess and me? *Riding* a horse through the forest is much more fun than riding round and round a corral.'

The boy looked up at his father, his big eyes hopeful. Simon frowned down at him.

'Would you like to go, Danny?' he asked rather doubtfully.

'With Aunt Rhoda? Can I?' said the boy uncertainly.

'It'll mean having to saddle Crackerjack again,' said Simon, and the boy looked troubled.

'I'll help you, Danny,' offered Rhoda gently. 'You know, Simon, he might like it. Lou did, even though she wasn't much good on a horse otherwise.'

'It's up to you, Danny,' said Simon coldly, ignoring Rhoda's argument. 'You don't have to go if you don't want to.'

'I want to go,' said the boy, his face set suddenly in stubborn lines. He pushed his hand into one of Rhoda's. 'Come on, Aunt Rhoda,' he said, tugging her hand to pull her in the direction of the red barn. 'Let's go and saddle Crackerjack, again.'

'Now you'll *have* to come with us,' cried Rhoda laughingly over her shoulder as she went with Danny. 'I refuse to be wholly responsible for this imp. I don't know the forest trails all that well, and we might get lost, if you're not with us.'

Simon scowled after her, his black eyebrows coming together in a fierce frown, and he muttered something disrespectful under his breath about women.

'Can't you really spare the time to go with us?' asked Jessica.

He slanted a glance at her. The dark scowl still hovered above his eyes, which were as cold as ice pellets. His glance lingered, drifting

over her face assessingly. Slowly the frown cleared, and his eyes softened.

'Perhaps I can, this once,' he murmured. 'I wouldn't like you to get lost in the forest. Come on, I know just the horse for you and I'll even help you to saddle him.'

The horse was a gelding called Snap. It was very pretty, mostly white in front and a golden brown over its back and hindquarters with a long flowing white tail. Simon told her it was what was known as a pinto and that she would find it sure-footed and accustomed to the trails. He led it out of the barn for her and heaved a heavy saddle on to it.

'This is what we call a stock saddle,' he explained as he tightened the girth round the horse's belly. 'We use it when we're working with the cattle because it's easy to balance in. You'll find you're able to sit in a natural position with your hips vertical and your back straight.' He helped her to mount, checked the length of the stirrup leathers and looked up at her. 'Are you comfortable?' he asked.

'Yes, very. I feel I could ride a long way like this.'

'That's the idea. That's what the Western saddle was designed for—long-distance riding.'

'You'd better go and help Rhoda now,' she suggested, and Simon gave her an ironical glance.

'She doesn't need any help. She's always been able to look after herself. She's as tough and as strong as some men and trickier than most women,' he remarked drily. 'She's even trickier than you are,' he added provocatively, and turning away strode off towards the black horse he had saddled for himself.

CHAPTER THREE

HARNESS jingled and saddles creaked as the horses plodded along a narrow path crossing a meadow of *long* grasses *starred* with blue, white and yellow wild flowers. A river edged the meadow, its green-reflecting water sliding sinuously over moss-covered stones. They crossed it by a narrow wooden bridge and entered the forest to climb up a rough trail that wound across the lower slopes of a mountain.

Shafts of sunlight filtered through the close weave of the branches of lodge pines, thick spruces and fluttering aspens. It highlighted clumps of bright yellow toadstools and glinted on rocks covered by pale lichen. Under the shelter of the trees the air was dead calm so the sound: of a nearby water fall carried clearly, a gurgling rushing noise of spilled, uncontrolled energy.

They rode in single file, Simon leading the way, Jessica next, followed by Danny, while Rhoda was last. The trail dipped down to another bridge spanning a gorge which another river had worn through the rocks over many years. Spray leapt up from the deep canyon below the bridge and moistened Jessica's skin. The noise of falling water was thunderous as it dropped in a green and white cascade.

Beyond the bridge the trail climbed again, then levelled out to wind through trees. Turning a bend, Jessica found herself in a small sunlit glade where Simon had reined in to wait for her. Sitting relaxed in his saddle, his hands resting on its horn, he watched her ride towards him.

'Well, do I measure up to your standards of riding?' she challenged as he turned his horse and brought it into step beside hers so that they were riding together.

'Better than most,' he replied, aggravatingly laconic.

'Better than most what?' she demanded.

'Better than most women, of course.'

'I suppose such faint praise coming from you should be taken as a compliment,' she remarked lightly.

'You can take it how you like. It doesn't matter to me/ he countered coolly.

'You don't have a very high opinion of women, do you?' she retorted.

'Now whatever gave you that idea?' he replied with a touch of irony.
'Women are all right, provided they know their place and keep it.'

'I can see you're one of those superior domineering men who believe there's only one place for a woman,' she countered, the feminist in her roused by his scorn.

'You're damned right, I do believe there's only one place for a woman in a man's life. In his bed,' he returned.

'That isn't what I meant,' Jessica protested hotly, her cheeks flaming suddenly.

'Then what did you mean?' Mockery rippled through Simon's voice. She had the impression he was playing with her and wished angrily that she hadn't let herself be aggravated by his attitude.

'I meant that you probably believe that a woman's place is in the home,' she explained weakly.

'That amounts to the same thing. For me home is a place to rest and be comfortable in after a day's work. I've no objection to finding a woman there as long as she doesn't start thinking that my appreciation of her physical difference gives her any rights of

possession. I'm an independent sort of guy and I don't like the feeling of being *owned*. And that forever, until death- do-us-part stuff is for the birds.'

"You're referring to marriage, I suppose," she said coolly, thoroughly outraged by his flippant cynicism.

"I'm referring to marriage," he concurred mockingly, imitating her accent. 'A relationship I can manage very well without.'

'And did you form that opinion about it before or after your marriage to Danny's mother?' she queried sweetly.

'What do you think?' he growled, and the remark with its oblique hint at past unhappiness silenced her effectively.

They rode on through the sun-flecked shade of the forest, sometimes in single file when the trail was narrowed by close-crowding trees, sometimes side by side where it was wider. The barks of the spruce were dark and scaly and from their lower branches lichen hung like strings of greenish-grey beads. Crushed by the hooves of the horses, the spruce needles which covered the path sent up a delicate fragrance which was noticeable even above the strong insistent smell of horse.

'Have you been trail riding before?' Simon's abrupt question startled her. 'You seem to know what you're doing.'

'Yes, I have, but we call it pony-trekking in England. I've done it among our mountains, which you'd think were molehills in comparison with yours.'

'So you find the Rockies impressive?' he enquired.

'More than that. They're fantastic, and I'm sure that having lived all your life with them on your doorstep you'd find living anywhere else a little dull.'

'I've found that for me to live anywhere else is impossible,' he replied, 'I've tried it. How do you find Snap?'

'Easy to ride.'

'He knows his way, so be careful how you use the bit. We use that curb bit only with the Western saddle, but it can be hard on a horse's mouth when in bad hands. Use it only for checking or reducing speed. If you want him to change direction just use the neck rein.'

The advice surprised Jessica as much as the faint praise had done. She suspected he didn't normally offer advice on how to ride to the people who hired his horses. Was it a peace-offering? An attempt to make amends for his rudeness to her earlier?

She glanced sideways at him. Against the sunlight which blazed behind a thin screen of birches and aspens now edging the path his profile was dark and inscrutable. He rode with a deceptive casualness, his lithe body swaying slightly in rhythm with the movement of the horse, one hand holding the reins, the other resting on his thighs .

'Are all these horses descended from the string your , grandfather brought to the ranch?' she asked, deciding to make the most of his more friendly manner.

'Who told you about my grandfather? Your grandmother? Or did Rhoda gossip on the way over from Narrow Lake?' he countered.

'Rhoda told me, but she wasn't gossiping, only telling me about the origins of the ranch,' she said coolly. 'But you don't have to tell me any more if you don't want to.'

His glance was sardonic, a flash of light in the darkness of his shadowed face.

'Okay, I'll tell you more, if only to satisfy that curiosity of yours,' he scoffed softly, with the glimmer of a smile. 'These horses are descended from the string brought up from the south by that shy nomad, Sam Benson.'

'Why do you call him a nomad?'

'Because until he arrived at the Lazy R that's what he was, a wanderer who had only one love, horses and the breeding of them. The string he brought were crossbreeds between wild cayuses and registered thoroughbred stallions, sure-footed and strong. Lazy R soon had a reputation for being able to supply well-trained tough horses which were in much demand by ranchers and homesteaders or anyone else who had to travel in those days across the prairies or through the mountains. But by the time my grandfather died the demand had declined.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Mechanisation of the ranches and farms. Times were hard for a while at the Lazy R, and my father was only able to earn a livelihood by becoming a farmer. He introduced a few hundred head of cattle, although this isn't considered to be real cattle country; he kept some sheep, a few hogs, and had a chicken house and enough milk cows to supply cream to the city dairies. He had no one thing in a big way, but he always had something to sell, which is the secret of good firming, and I've tried to follow his example.'

'But he kept the horses?' enquired Jessica.

'A few, because my grandmother insisted. She kept saying they would be in demand again. And she was right. With the setting up of the National Parks in the mountains we began to get tourists and campers coming to hire horses to ride the trails, and so that side was developed. In fact it was the job my father handed over to me, to organise and plan the trail rides.' He paused, then added in a self-mocking way, 'You see, I have only one trade and that's to do with horses, cattle and hay. I'm no good at anything else.'

'If your trade enables you to live in a place like this, why bother with any other?' she said.

'That's exactly the way I see it,' he replied on a note of surprise, giving her a sharp glance. 'I'll go ahead here because the trail gets very narrow and climbs steeply. Watch out for low-hung branches, or you might be stabbed in the eye.'

Jessica concentrated on riding. Snap never faltered but picked his way after the black horse along the twisting trail until it suddenly burst out of the trees into bright sunlight.

Before them lay an open flat area a wide meadow of long fringed grasses patched by masses of gold, rose and purple flowers. In the centre was a small lake, clear and pale, reflecting the green of the grass. Its water was so lucid that it showed beneath its surface the long silvery shapes of the trunks of the dead trees which had fallen into it.

Beyond the meadow darkly timbered slopes gave way to bare grey rock, glittering in the sunlight, rising in giant pyramidal steps to a peak, which, pointed like the mountain a child might draw, was sharply defined against the pale blue of the sky.

'This is as far as we'll come today,' said Simon, reining in. 'The way to Eagle Lake lies in that direction, climbing all the way.'

'I remember this place,' said Rhoda, riding up to them with Danny following her on Crackerjack. 'It hasn't changed much,' she added with a grimace, 'a few more dead trees.'

'And a few new ones,' said Simon pointing to the fresh green of a clump of small stiff spruce trees. 'Dying trees, rotting leaves, moss, make new trees, new flowers, new life.'

He's a poet and doesn't know it, thought Jessica, listening to the lilt of the words.

'It's so still and quiet up here,' she murmured. 'Are there any animals?'

'I think it's kind of scary,' said Danny with a little shudder as he gazed round with wide eyes. 'Do you think we'll see a grizzly, Dad?'

'Not at this time of the year. In summer they're way up in the high alpine country. Only in the spring and the fall of the year do they come down to the valleys looking for food. But there could be a black bear about.'

'What's the difference between a black bear and a grizzly?' asked Jessica.

'Grizzlies are the big ones,' he answered. 'They have humps on their backs. Some are black, some are brown and some are blond. Black bears are much smaller and don't have humps. They prefer to stay all year round in the dense bush or the heavily wooded areas.'

'What would you do if a bear came now, Daddy?' asked Danny, urging Crackerjack closer to his father as if he sensed that Simon was the one person there who could protect him from danger.

'I'd leave immediately and make sure I kept upwind of the animal so that he couldn't smell me,' said Simon.

'But supposing you couldn't get away? Supposing the bear was between you and your way of escape?' demanded Jessica. 'What would you do then?'

'Stay still and wait for him to move. Most bears only attack when someone comes between a mother and her cubs, or goes too close to their hoard of food. You must never harass a bear, it might urge him to attack you. If you can't get away, always play dead—lie on the ground and keep still.'

'I don't think I'd have the nerve to do that,' gasped Jessica. 'Would you, Rhoda?'

'Of course I would, and I have,' replied Rhoda, giving her a sparkling scornful glance.

'We'll go back now,' said Simon, 'by a different trail.'

Jessica lifted the reins and kneed her horse to follow him, only to find that Rhoda had thrust her chestnut horse in front of Snap and was barring the way.

'My turn now,' she said, with a brilliant yet strangely false smile.

'What do you mean?' asked Jessica.

'My turn to ride with Simon. You've had yours. Now you can have the pleasure of Danny's company,' replied Rhoda acidly, and whirling her horse she urged it into a canter after the black horse.

'Hey, Auntie Rhoda, wait for me, wait for me!'

Danny shrieked, and also tried to kick his horse into a canter. But Crackerjack was either too sedate or too lazy to canter and merely broke into a trot, so that Jessica was soon able to catch up with Danny and ride beside him. Ahead Rhoda had reached Simon and the two of them soon entered the shade of the forest.

'She's gone without me,' complained Danny, his round face crumpling with disappointment.

'Never mind,' said Jessica comfortingly. 'You ride with me and tell me about the animals that live in the woods. This morning when I woke up I saw a little animal with stripes down its back looking at me through the window. Do you know what it was?

'That was a chipmunk,' he answered seriously. 'There are hundreds and hundreds of them. Haven't you ever seen one before?'

'No, there aren't any in my country.'

'Oh. Aren't you a Canadian, then?' Danny was very surprised and puzzled.

'No, I'm from England.'

'Are there any big cities there, like Edmonton, with lots of lights, and stores, and people and buses?' he demanded.

'Yes, there are. But there are no mountains like you have here. And no bears or chipmunks, except in zoos.'

'I like cities,' said Danny. 'I was born in Edmonton and so was my mum. My grandpa and grandma say I can go and live with them there, but Dad won't let me. He says I've got to live where he lives and learn to ride a horse like he does. I hate horses and I hate him.'

They had reached the place where Simon and Rhoda had entered the forest. The trail tunnelled under the down-sweeping branches of the trees but was wide enough for them to ride side by side.

A little shocked by Danny's expression of hate for his father, Jessica watched the boy out of the corners of her eyes. Even she could see that he sat the horse like a bag of potatoes, without grace, and that he held the reins nervously, sometimes pulling on them unnecessarily so that Crackerjack tossed his head protestingly.

What a disappointment the child must be to the man who couldn't live anywhere else and who had no other trade but horses, hay and cattle. But was Simon wise to keep the child with him when an alternative had been offered? Surely it would be better for both to father and son if Danny was allowed to go and live with his grandparents? It would put an end to the antagonism between them and might teach Danny to appreciate the ranch, give him a chance to get living in a city out of his system...

Jessica shook her head impatiently. What was she doing? The problem was no business, of hers. She was here on holiday and in a couple of weeks this visit to the mountains would seem like a dream and the people she had met, including the man in the white hat whose path had crossed hers so coincidentally, would seem like shadows, vague and insubstantial, without feelings, without human problems.

But it was impossible to change her own nature with a shake of the head. Kneeing her horse so that she caught up with Danny again, she began to ask him questions and soon had him telling her all about his Grandpa and Grandma Holstein who lived in a high-rise apartment block on the banks of the river in Edmonton, fifteen floors, up, with a balcony and elevators to ride and a colour television set and ... The list of the material advantages owned by his grandparents, and which obviously fascinated Danny, went on and on until Jessica interrupted

it with another question and learned unexpectedly that Danny had another grandma, Simon's mother.

'Does she live at the ranch?' Jessica queried. 'No, she lives in an apartment too, in Calgary with Uncle Ted.'

'Your father's brother?'

Danny shook his head. 'Oh, no, Uncle Ted is her husband. Dad's brother is called Farley. He's a lawyer. That's much better than looking after animals on a silly old ranch, Grandma says. She says I could be a lawyer too when I grow up. She told me once that she took Dad and Uncle Farley away from the ranch and sent them to a good school, but Dad ran away from the school and came back to the ranch and his dad. She likes living in the city best too. They're all on my side,' Danny added complacently. 'They all think Dad is crazy making me live here, and one day, if he doesn't let me do what I want, I'm going to run away.'..'

'Like he did,' put in Jessica quietly, 'because his mother made him do something he didn't want to do.'

The boy turned to look at her, his eyes wide.

'Yeah, he did, didn't he?' he exclaimed. 'But Granny Grace, his mum, says she was only trying to do her best for him. She wanted him to have a good education so that he wouldn't have to look after cattle and horses all his life.'

'There's nothing wrong with looking after cattle and horses,' Jessica said gently.

'I s'pose not. But Dad's got the brains to do more, Granny says so.'

'I think looking after animals properly and farming the land successfully and breeding horses so that it's possible for people like

me from the city to go riding among the mountains needs brains, and possibly more strength of mind than it takes to be a lawyer,' said Jessica.

The boy didn't answer, and they rode for a while in silence as the horses picked their way carefully down the trail towards the gorge. This time, where a wooden bridge spanned it, there was no waterfall and the river roared and rushed far below them between high walls of rock; green with moss.

From the bridge it wasn't far to the edge of the forest and soon they were crossing open land. Ahead of them Rhoda and Simon rode side by side, both tall and straight in the saddle, but by the time Jessica and Danny reached the red barn where the horses were stabled there was no sign of the other two. Only the small man in the red and black checked shirt and the worn levis was there waiting to take the horses.

'Y'r dad says you're to go right into the house for your lunch,' he said softly to Danny.

'Where's Aunty Rhoda?' asked Danny as he slid down from the saddle.

'Guess she's gone to the car out front. Did'ja have a good ride, son?'

'It was all right,' admitted Danny grudgingly.

A clear, carrying female voice calling his name made him whirl towards the house. A woman was standing at the back entrance. She was square in shape and was wearing a bright red shirt with dark-coloured pants. Her straight black hair was cropped short and her skin had a golden sheen to it.

'Coming, Mary!' Danny yelled back at her, and turned to Jessica. 'That's Mary Trip. She keeps house for Dad and me,' he explained,

and then smiled suddenly, a friendly, cheeky, wholly boyish smile which banished all the petulance and sulkiness from his round face. 'See you around, Jess,' he said.

'I hope so. On Monday, perhaps?' she suggested, smiling back. 'You could come to Eagle Lake too, couldn't you?'

'Would you like me to come?' he asked, and there was a pathos in the way he asked the question which touched her heart. Obviously not many people asked the boy to go anywhere.

'Of course I would. I've a brother in England the same age as you. We've often gone camping together.'

'I'll ... I'll have to ask Dad,' he said uncertainly, as once more his name was called.

'Well, you ask him and tell him I invited you to come,' replied Jessica. 'Now you'd best go for lunch. See you around, Danny.'

His grin widened with delight at her use of the expression, and turning, he went off with a kicking liveliness in his run as if suddenly all had come right with his world.

Her thoughts full of Danny, Jessica walked to the front of the ranch house. Now that the sun had almost reached its zenith it was hot, a clear dry heat which burned the bare skin. The handle of the vehicle door seared the palm of her hand and the interior of the car was stuffy, blue with tobacco smoke from the cigarette which Rhoda was holding in one hand while she nibbled nervously at the nails on the fingers of the other and frowned sullenly at the windshield.

Surprised to see Rhoda so obviously disturbed, Jessica sat down on the vinyl-covered seat, feeling its hot surface burn through her jeans. Closing the door, she let down the window. Without a word Rhoda

started the engine, moved the gear lever on the steering wheel column and the car eased forward. A quick turn of the wheels and it was bumping along the narrow road which led to the highway.

Was it the midday heat that was causing Rhoda's sullen silence? Or had something happened during her ride back to the ranch with Simon to destroy that bouncing, confident radiance that she had shown earlier?

'Whew, it's awfully hot!' said Jessica, wiping her brow with a handkerchief.

'It'll be hotter this afternoon. The best remedy is to go swimming or just sit in a cool spot somewhere. Enjoy the ride? Feel any stiffness?' asked Rhoda.

'I enjoyed it, and I don't feel stiff ... yet. What about you? Do you feel stiff? You don't seem as cheerful as you were on the drive out to the ranch.'

Rhoda's sidelong glance was wary, slanted from under long downward-sweeping dark lashes.

'Things didn't turn out as I'd hoped, that's all,' she said, turning her attention to the road again. 'I'm beginning to think I might have come back too late. Or that I should have stayed instead of going away after Lou died.'

'Lou was Simon's wife, your friend who lived next door to you in Edmonton?' queried Jessica, rolling the car window up again a little because dust from the surface of the road was flying in, covering everything with a fine film, drying up her nostrils and her throat.

'That's right. At least I thought she was my friend until she married Simon,' replied Rhoda with a touch of bitterness. 'I knew him first—

met him when I came to Narrow Lake for a holiday with Aunt Molly, the summer I was eighteen. What a gorgeous summer that was! I'd finished with school, I'd been accepted at university to take a degree in Education and I fell in love for the first time.'

'With Simon?'

'With Simon. He was twenty-two and his father had put him in charge of organising the trail rides. He'd dropped out of university because he couldn't hack it ... I mean he'd found he didn't want to be a student. He wanted to be on the ranch all the time working with the animals.'

'Did. he fall in love with you?' asked Jessica cautiously.

Rhoda laughed a little drearily.

'I dunno. I've often wondered if men ever go for that love business or if they have just one thing in mind when they meet a woman they like the look of. You've been married and have lived with a man for a short time. Did he ever tell you that he loved you?'

Jessica flushed. 'Of course he did. I ... I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't known he returned my love.'

'He actually told you he loved you?' Rhoda sounded amazed and just a little derisive as she braked the car at the end of the roadway and looked to the left to make sure nothing was coming along the fast highway before she turned right.

'He actually told me,' replied Jessica, pleased that her voice was calm and even showed nothing of the shakiness she was feeling because of the memories Rhoda's enquiries were stirring up. 'Marriage isn't just sexual involvement on a physical level, you know. It means much more than that.'

'So I've been told,' murmured Rhoda drily. Now that they were facing directly south the sun was blazing in through the windshield and the smooth surface of the highway shone with a bright glare. Rhoda had put on sunglasses and had pulled down a sun visor from the roof of the car above the windshield to cut down the glare. Not having her sunglasses with her, Jessica pulled down the visor on her side too and, now that they were off the dusty road, rolled down the window again. Although warm, the air which was wafted in by the fast passage of the car had a cooling effect.

'Anyway,' Rhoda went on, 'Simon didn't say he loved me that summer, but he went riding with me a lot and seemed to like my company, and at the time that was enough for me. In fact it kept me going all through my first year at university and the thought of seeing him again made me leap at Aunt Molly's invitation to come out to Narrow Lake with her, and when she suggested I brought a friend for company I didn't hesitate to invite Lou.' Rhoda paused, then added bitterly, 'I guess that was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life!'

'Why? Did Simon fall in love with her?'

'Again, I don't know, but she certainly fell for him in a big way and made sure he knew she liked him.' Rhoda's voice thickened with disgust. 'She was all over him,' she muttered.

'What was she like to look at?'

'Small, very pretty, with a cloud of red-gold hair and big golden-brown eyes, and a way of moving and talking that I can only call provocative. Oh, I'd never thought of her in that way until that summer, because I'd never seen her at work on a man before.'

'Was she at university too?'

'Oh, no. She went to work in a department store in downtown Edmonton when she left school. She was crazy about clothes and make-up and was always doing her hair differently. All she and I had in common was the fact that our fathers had come to this country as immigrants from Germany; we lived on the same street and went to the same schools. I asked her to come with me that summer because I was kind of sorry for her. She was the eldest of a big family and had never had much money to spare for holidays. She'd never been anywhere, had never even come as far as the mountains before.'

'What happened?' Jessica asked.

'Nothing very much, at least not obviously. I had to go back to Edmonton for a few days and Aunt Molly said Lou could stay until I returned,' replied Rhoda. 'I guess that was when it happened, the falling in love bit, the big seduction scene, call it what you like. I came back. Nothing seemed any different. The holiday ended, and Lou and I both went back to Edmonton. I didn't see her again for a while because my parents had moved away by then, to Calgary, and I was in residence at the university and totally involved with my studies there.'

'And no longer in love with Simon?'

Rhoda shrugged. 'Oh yes, I think so. He was still the number one man in my thoughts, anyway. That's why I was really shaken when I ran into Lou one day at the store where she worked and she told me she and Simon were getting married. She was full of it, even told me when she expected their first child to be born. So they were married. Five months later she left him and returned to live with her parents,'

'Left him? Why?' Jessica was startled.

'She didn't like living on the ranch, I guess.'

'What did he do? Follow her?'

'Not at first. Only when Lou's parents sent for him because she was very ill in the last month of her pregnancy he went to Edmonton.'

'Did she come back with him to the ranch after Danny was born?'

'No, because Simon didn't come back right away. He stayed with her in Edmonton, got a job with the government agricultural department. It wasn't the first time he'd tried living in the city and I guess he was pretty miserable.'

Jessica was silent for a while, looking out at the rolling green land to the remote and dazzling peaks of the mountains. She thought of the places she had seen during the ride that morning, remembering Simon saying that he had found it impossible to live anywhere else.

'He must have loved her very much to have given up living on the ranch to live where she wanted to be,' she commented.

'That's how it seemed,' replied Rhoda, 'but come the spring he brought Lou and the child back here. His father had had a severe stroke, you see, and needed him here. Lou stayed the summer, but left again in the fall with Danny. Simon didn't follow her and eventually they agreed to live apart.'

'I see. How did she die?'

'From first degree burns,' replied Rhoda cryptically.

'Oh, how awful! Where was the fire?'

'In the apartment building where she was living. Simon had gone to visit her and Danny—when he went into the apartment lie found smoke pouring from the kitchen. He grabbed Danny and took him outside, then went back for Lou. He was badly burned himself

getting her out. You may have noticed the scars on his hands. Lou died on the way to hospital.'

Horror and pain tore through Jessica. Eyes wide and staring, she lived through her imagination the whole disastrous happening which had just been described so curtly by Rhoda and then sat silent, puzzled by her own reaction. It had been a long time since she had felt so emotionally involved with anything which had happened to another person.

'I should have stayed, I can see that now,' Rhoda went on, seeming to speak more to herself than to Jessica. 'But I thought he needed time to get over it, and I had the chance to go to Toronto and work for a further degree. I wrote to him, but he never replied, and when another opportunity came up, to go and teach in Africa, I took it. Now I'm back.' She paused, took a rather shaky breath and, went on rather forlornly, 'Simon's different. He's changed, hardened. He ... he was pretty nasty to me on that ride back through the forest. He seems to have some sort of grudge against me.'

'Oh, surely not,' Jessica comforted. 'He's just wary about women in general, and it's hardly surprising considering his experience with Lou, is it?'

'You believe that's what it is, then?' Rhoda flashed her an interested glance. 'Yes, but I knew him before Lou came along. He doesn't have to be wary with me.'

'You think he's changed. Maybe he thinks the same about you. I don't suppose you're the same as you were eleven years ago.'

'I guess you're right,' replied Rhoda with a laugh as she turned the car off the highway and on to the lane leading to Narrow Lake. 'Moving around has smoothed a few corners off, and possibly made me more aggressive, more determined to make things go my way. Still, I can't

help thinking that it would have been better if I'd gone to see him without you. Having you there seemed to foul everything up.'

'I'm not sure how I should take that,' said Jessica lightly. 'You make me sound like some sort of pollutant!'

'Sorry. What I'm trying to say is, you diverted Simon's attention from me.'

'It wasn't intentional, believe me,' retorted Jessica.

'Okay, so you didn't do it deliberately, but I couldn't help noticing that for two people who had only just met, you and he seemed to have a lot to say to each other at the corral and then on the ride through the forest. And don't think for one moment that I didn't notice how he helped you to saddle up but made no effort to help me.'

Envy made Rhoda's voice harsh, and for a moment Jessica wondered whether she should tell the other woman how she had met Simon in Edmonton. But if she did would Rhoda understand those meetings any better than James had done? Wouldn't she read more into them, as he had? And wouldn't that rouse her jealousy even further and quite unnecessarily?

'He only helped me with the saddle because I'm a stranger here, new to everything,' she replied coolly. 'And if we seemed to talk a lot it was because he was satisfying my curiosity about the ranch, the horses and the mountains. There was nothing else in it, I'm sure.'

'Well, I'm not so sure,' returned Rhoda as she guided the station wagon to its parking place under the shade of a big maple tree in front of the Crawleys' cottage. 'And it's going to be interesting to see whether he comes on that trail ride tomorrow.'

Hand on the handle of the car door ready to open it, Jessica paused and looked back. Rhoda was watching her with narrowed eyes that sparkled with malice.

'Why?' asked Jessica uncertainly.

'Because if he comes with us it will be to see you again,' replied Rhoda.

'Oh, it's ridiculous to assume that,' scoffed Jessica. 'If he comes at all it will be to bring Danny, as he did today.'

'Oh, I agree, he's not past using the boy as an excuse to come with us if Danny happens to say he wants to come, to disguise his real reason for coming. Simon was never obvious, he was always apparently aloof. And he still is. That's something about him which hasn't changed.'

'I still think you're barking up the wrong tree,' said Jessica with a little laugh.

'What do you mean?' asked Rhoda with a frown.

'I think you're letting your disappointment in your meeting with Simon this morning lead your imagination astray. I'm not like Lou, you know. I'm not helpless and I'm not looking for a man to marry. I've been married, and right now I'm not interested in being married again. It ... it takes time to recover and to learn to love again.'

'But don't you see,' insisted Rhoda, 'that's exactly why Simon might be interested in you. He's not interested in marriage either, but that doesn't mean he leads the life of a monk, completely turned off sex. Brief affairs which make no demands on his time or emotions must suit him fine. You're here on holiday. You're attractive and not inexperienced in sexual involvement because you've been married,

and you're just about coming out of the deep freeze you've been living in since your husband died. You're ready for an affair and...'

'Stop it! I don't want to hear any more,' said Jessica sharply. 'Nothing is going to happen between Simon and me. And if I'm going to have an affair with anyone, it's ... it's going to be with my boss.'

'Really?' Rhoda's voice lilted upwards with surprise. 'You know, I can't tell when you're kidding or not. You keep a straight face, yet you have a twinkle in your eyes. Did you mean that about your boss?'

'Well, he did say before he went off to the tar sands that he no longer thinks of me as a daughter, so I'd say he was leading up to something wouldn't you?' Jessica spoke flippantly, pleased to have found a way to divert Rhoda from the path along which her imagination had been taking her.

'Could be,' agreed Rhoda, who was looking a little surprised. 'Look, Jess, I'm sorry. I guess I got carried away. You see, I've been looking forward so much to seeing Simon again and...'

'I understand,' said Jessica gently. 'And if I were you I wouldn't let what happened this morning influence you too much. There'll be other meetings with him for you when I'm far away on the other side of the Atlantic, when there'll be no one present to distract his attention. Now, did you say something about swimming?'

'You bet I did! In the lake. Looks like Cindy and Molly are already in.' Rhoda was radiant again, oozing the cheerful confidence which must have been a great asset in her career as a teacher. 'Hope you have a swim-suit or a bikini with you.'

The water of the lake was tinglingly refreshing, but even on that hot afternoon it was too cold for leisurely swimming. After two brisk plunges into the sparkling blue depths Jessica joined the others to eat

the delicious ham and salad sandwiches and drink iced tea which Molly had brought down to the beach on a tray.

Afterwards they all sunbathed, talking in a desultory way about the trail ride and what they would need to take on it. It seemed that Molly could provide a sleeping bag for Jessica, and Rhoda had her own with her. Riding boots and waterproof jackets would also be needed.

'Sometimes it can get pretty wild and blustery in the high country, above the snow line, even at this time of the year, and if we're not prepared Joe Trip will be angry,' Cindy was saying seriously when the sound of a car approaching along the narrow road made her look past the others who were facing her. 'Oh, look!' she exclaimed, her face lighting up. 'Here's Jan Petersen.'

'Good.' Molly swung her legs off the canvas lounge where she had been lying and reading her romantic novel. 'He told me he intended to go camping in the mountains beyond Yellowhead Pass and I suggested he should call in on his way back. Hi, Jan,' she called out to the blond,, bearded giant who was getting out of a rather battered-looking Volkswagen bus. 'We're down here on the beach!'

Introductions were made, and Molly explained that Jan was a naturalist at present studying for his PhD. at Edmonton University, where he was also lecturing in Natural History. Tall and lean, dressed in the inevitable checked cotton shirt and blue jeans, he squatted down on the beach beside them and talked a little shyly about his camping adventures that summer along the Cariboo Trail in British Columbia.

When Cindy mentioned to him the planned trail ride to Eagle Lake he looked interested.

'Any chance of me joining you?' he asked.

'It's really Jess's ride,' said Cindy.

'The more the merrier,' replied Jess with a laugh. 'But' won't we have to book a horse for him and tell the trail boss there'll be another mouth to feed?'

'That's easily done,' said Molly. 'Cindy'll go down to the Mackays' and use their phone. You can camp for the night here, Jan, provided you sing for your supper.'

'Sing?' queried Rhoda, who had been sitting very quietly.

'Yes, sing,' said Molly with a chuckle. 'Jan plays the guitar and sings. His repertoire is strictly country style. I love it.'

'You don't remember me, do you?' Jan spoke suddenly, almost aggressively as he stared at Rhoda.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

'Should I?' she drawled as she selected a cigarette from the pack beside her.

Above the gingery blond beard which covered most of his face Jan's cheeks showed a dull red.

'We were in the same biology class ten or so years ago,' he muttered rather truculently.

'Oh, you're *that* Jan Petersen!' exclaimed Rhoda, her eyes widening. 'I guess the beard makes quite a difference,' she added with a smile. 'Well, this is a coincidence'

'No, it isn't,' retorted Jan roughly. 'Molly told me you'd be here and that's why I looked in.'

'Jess, why don't you come with me down to the Mackays' to make that phone call?' suggested Cindy.

'I'd like to,' agreed Jessica, getting to her feet. 'I'll just put on some shorts and a shirt.'

'We'll walk round,' said Cindy a few minutes later when Jessica joined her on the verandah of the house. 'It isn't far if we take the path round the lake.'

The path was shaded by fluttering aspens on the lakeside and by stiff dark spruces on the other, yet they took their time because it was still hot..

'Rhoda is mean sometimes,' Cindy burst out abruptly.

'Why do you say that?' queried Jessica, surprised by the girl's criticism of her cousin. Usually Cindy was so easy-going.

'She pretended she didn't know Jan, yet she used to go about with him when they were students.'

'And when he didn't have a beard,' put in Jessica quietly in defence of Rhoda. 'It probably does make a difference to his appearance.'

'But Jan isn't the sort of person you'd forget easily. He's very tall for one thing, and very blond for another,' argued Cindy. 'I think Rhoda did it deliberately. She's so taken up with the idea of renewing her friendship with Simon Benson that she can't spare a thought for anyone else. I bet she asked Simon to come on the trail ride with us.'

'Yes, she did.'

'What did he say?'

'He didn't commit himself,' admitted Jessica.

'Good. I hope he doesn't come, not because I don't like him but because it will give Jan. a chance to renew his friendship with Rhoda.'

'I never thought of you as a matchmaker,' Jessica teased with a smile.

'And neither have I,' replied Cindy with a laugh, 'but I think Jan deserves a chance.'

The Mackays' summer cottage was a rambling bungalow which seemed to be full of children and dogs. Cindy used the phone and then invited the whole family to come to her mother's place for a barbecue supper and a sing-song that evening. She and Jessica stayed for a while talking, then walked back along the shore of the lake. By the time they reached the Crawleys' cottage, Jan was already preparing the charcoal in a brazier for cooking the steaks and hamburgers out of doors.

In the kitchen Rhoda was slicing lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers for a tossed salad in a big wooden bowl and Molly was finding plates and cutlery which she asked Cindy to set out on the two wooden picnic tables which were on the lawn at the back of the cottage.

'Any good at cooking over charcoal?' she asked Jessica.

'I've never done it,' admitted Jessica.

'Well, now's the chance to learn a good old summer institution of these parts,' replied Molly. 'Take this meat out and Jan will show you how.'

While the meat was being slowly broiled on a grill set over the glowing charcoal the Mackays arrived in full force, bringing with them a crate of beer for the adults, and another of soft drinks for the children and those adults who didn't drink beer.

When the first steaks and hamburgers were cooked to his satisfaction Jan yelled, 'Come and get it!' and soon everyone was heaping a plate with cooked meat and salad and helping themselves to hot bread rolls from a basket on one of the tables. As they all sat about eating, drinking and talking the sun slid down behind the mountains. It didn't go dark straight away because the sun hadn't really set, but its light was cut off by the great mass of rock so that although the sky remained a pale rose-tinted blue, shadows lengthened and a faint cool breeze stirred the leaves of birches and aspens and ruffled the surface of the lake.

At Molly's request Jan brought his guitar from his vehicle. Some of the songs he sang were familiar to Jessica. There was the *Red River Valley* and *You are my sunshine*, but some were composed, Cindy told her, by a contemporary Canadian folk-singer, and one she liked in particular was called *In The Early Morning Rain*.

Listening to the pleasant, slightly nasal voice of Jan and looking round the group of people as they sat in the purple gloaming, Jessica thought how much she liked being there among them. She liked their simple, casual ways, the way they accepted her without question and called her Jess as if they had known her all her life.

The singing, the talking and the dancing and general larking about might have gone on until the early hours of the morning if Molly hadn't called a halt because it was necessary for those of them who were going on the trail ride next day to pack up what they needed and be ready to leave at eight o'clock in the morning.

Once in bed, Jessica slept well. She was awakened next morning by Cindy, and she dressed in jeans and a cotton roll-neck sweater, over which she put a V-necked Shetland wool sweater she had brought with her. Molly, who took the same size in shoes, had lent her a sturdy pair of leather lace-up boots, useful for both riding and

walking, and Cindy had lent her a padded quilted nylon jacket with a hood for when they rode above the snowline.

At the ranch Joe Trip was waiting for them. He was a lean, weathered man of about sixty years of age, with bright blue eyes set in a mass of wrinkles. His Indian blood was revealed in the colour of his skin and in his broad high cheekbones and long, slightly flattened nose. He gave instructions to Al Curtis, the small man Jessica had met the day before, in a curiously garbled- sounding language which Cindy said was Cree. There was no sign of Simon or Canny.

'Is the boss coming with us?' Rhoda asked Joe in her forthright way.

He was loading a packhorse with camping equipment, stowing the gear in huge canvas bags which fitted on to cross frames which were slung across the horse's back.

'No, he isn't, ma'am,' he replied softly. 'Guess he has work to do around the ranch.'

'What about the boy, Danny?' persisted Rhoda.

'I haven't seen him around this morning,' replied Joe equably. 'Time you were in the saddle, ma'am, if you're coming with us.'

Relieved because Simon had decided not to come and that Rhoda would not now jump to any conclusions about him, Jessica swung up on to Snap's back and settled herself in the saddle. Almost at once relief was followed by a strange stab of disappointment. She would have liked to have visited Eagle Lake in the company of the grandson of Rose Roberts, the woman who had once taken her grandmother to the lake.

Satisfied that they were all ready, Joe Trip mounted his horse, signalled to them to fall into line behind him, and the three loaded packhorses and spare saddle horse he was leading.

They followed the trail they had taken the previous day, but when they reached the meadow they didn't stop. As they crossed it diagonally Jan caught up with Jess and rode beside her, and answered her questions about the flowers.

'Those small purple ones with silver-green stems are wild sisters,' he said, 'and the blatant pink ones are what the Indians call fireweed, but which you probably know as rosebay willowherb. These flame-coloured flowers which look like untidy paintbrushes that have been badly used are in fact called Red Indian paintbrush. Seeing them in clusters like that is almost as shocking as seeing tongues of flame in these mountains.'

'Are there many fires?' asked Jessica.

'There were and there still are in spite of all the warnings and precautions which are taken. You'll see what damage a fire can do when we get, higher, up there where we're going.'

He pointed to the slope before them. Sharp blackened spears covered it, the charred remains of what had once been elegant spruces and pines.

On they rode, always climbing, following a creek, a rush of clear water over smooth stones. They crossed it by an old timber bridge and began to zig-zag across a wilderness of stone. Ahead of them Joe and the pack-horses were only a few yards above them, yet were about half a mile distant.

The forest was thinning out and in the still quietness the only sound was the tinkle of the horses' hoofs on the slippery shale of the trail.

Looking down the way she had come, Jessica saw the blue misted green of the spruce soft against the yellowish green of the pines and the orange of rot inside the silver trunks of dead or dying trees.

Turning a bend on the switchback trail, she found herself facing a cool breeze and was glad of her jacket. Across the valley lay a patch of snow, sparkling under the sunlight. A bird flew by, a flash of yellow against grey rock, and Jan looked back to tell her it was a cedar waxwing. From a clump of miniature trees another bird whistled a tune—the boreal chickadee, Jan informed heir.

It was past noon and her legs were beginning to ache when they at last broke free of the last of the small clumps of trees and entered a pass between two ridges of rock. From a space between ragged white clouds the sun blazed down and they stopped at a watering hole. The horses began to drink deeply, turning from the water to graze on the short fine grass. A spring above the water hole flowed out from a fissure in the rocks and made a small river which tumbled over stones between banks which were a haze of blue where forget-me-nots grew in profusion.

Joe built a small fire and slung two pails of water over it from a stick, the ends of which rested in the forked ends of two other sticks which he had shoved into crevices in the ground. He made coffee and they ate the sandwiches he had brought while they rested on the ground or just stood around enjoying the warmth of the sun on their faces and the freshness of the clear cool air.

Suddenly Al Curtis stood up and walked away to the edge of the trail. He seemed to be listening. He came back and said something in Cree to Joe.

'What goes on?.' demanded Rhoda.

'Al says there's someone on the trail behind us,' said Joe.

'Another group heading for Eagle Lake?' asked Cindy.

'No. Single rider,' said Al.

'How can you tell?' asked Jessica.

'Only one horse. One lot of harness,' said Al, and began to collect up the coffee mugs while Joe kicked out the fire.

'Shouldn't we wait until he comes?' said Rhoda, standing up and stretching her arms.

'How do you know it's a *he*?' challenged Jan with a grin. 'Al may be able to hear a long way, but I doubt if you can see round bends and through rock.'

Rhoda's face flushed slightly and across the smoking remains of the fire her eyes met Jessica's.

'Oh, I dunno,' she replied, shrugging her shoulders. 'I thought it might be the ranch boss coming after us to bring something we've forgotten.'

'We don't forget things, ma'am,' Joe Trip drawled. 'And if we did the boss would send another rider after us. He wouldn't come himself. Guess we'll wait for whoever it is.'

Everything was packed again and most of them were in the saddle ready to leave when Al Curtis lifted his head like an animal sniffing the wind for a scent of danger.

'He pretty damn close now, conning slow, like he's tired,' he muttered.

They all looked in the direction of the entrance to the pass. From round the clump of small stunted trees came a distinctive black,

brown and white pony. In the middle of its back sat a sack of potatoes wearing a white stetson hat.

'It's Danny!' exclaimed Rhoda and, after turning to give Jessica a bright knowledgeable glance, she stared expectantly at the clump of trees. Jessica stared too, fully expecting to see a black horse ridden by a man in a white hat appear. But no other rider came and she realised that Danny was by himself.

He was white-faced but triumphant as he clung to the saddle horn.

'I did it, I did it I' he crowed. 'I caught up with you, Jess.'

'Does y'r dad know y're here?' growled Joe Trip, standing at Crackerjack's head and holding the reins. ^ 'No. I waited until he'd gone off in the jeep to Clinton, then I saddled up Cracker jack all by myself and came after you,' said Danny, looking round at each of them in turn as if he expected them to applaud him by clapping their hands. 'That was some ride. Do you think I could have a drink and something to eat?'

'Sure thing, young 'un.' Joe was gentle as he helped the boy down from the saddle. 'But you did wrong coming after us without telling your dad.'

'I wanted to come,' muttered the boy, a mutinous scowl darkening his face.

'But you'll have to go back,' said Joe firmly. 'I'll send Al with you.'

The boy's face crumpled and tears brimmed in his big eyes.

'Oh, can't he stay with us?' asked Jessica appealingly. 'I did invite him to come and I'll be responsible for him.'

Joe shoved his battered tall-crowned stiff-brimmed hat back from his lined forehead.

'His dad won't be any too pleased, ma'am. And I guess he's going to be worried when he gets back from Clinton and finds the boy is missing,' he said.

'I left a note for him, telling him where I'd gone,' said Danny. 'And I told Mary where I was going.'

'Didn't she try to stop you?' asked Joe.

'She didn't believe I was going to do what I said,' replied Danny, his frown disappearing as he grinned impishly. 'Please, Joe, let me come the rest of the way. Dad won't mind when he finds out I've ridden all this way, like he used to do when he was my age.'

Joe scratched the back of his neck, an action which tipped his hat forward again. He glanced at Jessica, his blue eyes sharp and shrewd.

'I should by rights send Al back to let the boss know the boy is safe with us and that you said you'll be responsible for him,' he mumbled.

'Well, why don't you?' urged Cindy. 'We'll all pitch in and help do Al's job until he comes back. I'll ride at the rear and by the time we're making camp tonight Al should have caught up with us again.'

Joe stood. his mouth pursed as he considered her suggestion slowly, and Danny watched him hopefully.

'Okay,' Joe drawled at last, 'we'll do it that way.'

Danny gave a whoop of joy and Al swung up into his saddle and went off at a smart trot down the pass the way they had come.

After Danny had wolfed down some sandwiches and drunk some water, Joe led off with the packhorses again towards a narrow slit between two high walls of rock. The patient horses, which had been standing still, became a moving flowing line following the leaders.

When they at last emerged from the narrow almost tunnel-like pass Jessica caught her breath in amazement, for in front of them lay a broad, humpy be- flowered. meadow of stone; an alpine meadow high, in the sky and in the distance peak after peak of shining mountains, a jagged edge of snow-dazzling rock flung against, the sky.

Once again Jan rode beside Jessica and named the alpine flowers for her, pointing out clumps of white anemone, yellow paintbrush, white heath and mountain heather which was quite different from the Scottish heather she knew.

Crossing a shallow dimpling stream, they saw a herd of caribou. One raised its head. Its antlers swept back over its head, slightly flattened.

'That's the bull,' murmured Jan, reining in beside Jessica, who had stopped to watch. 'He's giving a warning to the others.'

The herd, taking the Warning, ran a short distance, stopped and then as the bull joined them scurried from the stream and disappeared behind outcrops of rock.

There was room to ride side by side across the meadow, and they took their time, enjoying the limitless space and the feeling of being remote and inaccessible from the rest of the world. But soon Joe was telling them to get into single file again as the trail climbed steeply across a shoulder of the mountain which seemed to be a wasteland of stone, although once, as she glanced down at the tilting earth and rock beneath her horse's hooves, Jessica felt a leap of delight as she

saw some blue flowers clinging there, their stems tall and nodding. Harebells.

Across a narrow ridge of rock they rode and then the way was downhill, a steep and jolting ride into a natural amphitheatre surrounded, by four walls of nearly vertical rock.

'We stay the night here,' announced Joe, and slid from his saddle. Taking his axe he began at once to split wood for a fire.

There was a wooden cooking shack consisting of three rough stone walls and a tin roof, and they all crowded close to it to watch Joe cook the evening meal.

'Fourteen miles we've come today,' he said when he eventually served the steak and onions, mashed potatoes and gravy he had made.

'Is that all?' groaned Jan. 'Feels more like forty!'

'Anyone else stiff?' asked Joe, looking round. 'How about you, Danny?'

'Some,' admitted the boy. 'But it's worth it just to be here.'

'Best way to stop yourself from stiffening too much is to go for a walk,' said Joe. 'By the time you come back I'll have the tents up.'

Cindy stayed behind to help Joe and the rest of them climbed up a low ridge. Jan and Rhoda soon forged ahead, but Jessica stayed with Danny to slither and slide on the slippery scree. The rocks weren't grey as she had first thought, but multi-coloured; yellow, red and brown and green where lichen grew. Looking down to the camp, she thought it seemed to huddle for comfort to a stand of straggly-looking spruce and the horses were beginning to stray away down a narrow valley where they ate the precious flowers which no one was allowed to pick.

On the way down the hill she asked Danny if he had asked his father if he could come on the ride.

'No. I just asked him if he was coming,' he explained. 'I could tell by the way he said no that it wasn't any use asking him if I could go with you, so I decided to come after he'd gone out.'

'You took a risk. Supposing you'd had an accident?'

'Well, I didn't, did I?' he retorted. 'I'm here and I'm glad I'm here. I wouldn't have missed this for anything!'

The tents were set up over pole frames. Jessica and Cindy were to share the biggest with Rhoda. Jan and Danny would share another smaller one and Joe would share his with Al when the horse-wrangler came back.

Slowly the light went from the patch of sky and huddled in blankets because up there, six thousand feet or more above sea level, the night wind was chilly, they sat round the fire while Jan played his guitar. .

It was Joe who detected the approach of a horse. He held up his hand for silence and they all listened intently, hearing only the tinkle of shale disturbed by hooves sliding on it.

'He's sure coming quietly,' said Joe with a knowing grin. 'I know only one man who would creep up on us like that to give us a surprise,' he added, rising to his feet, and they all stared at him.

'Hi there, boss!' he called out. 'You made pretty quick time. Guess you're hungry.'

'Wouldn't mind some of your steak and onions, Joe.' Simon's voice was quiet yet held an undercurrent of laughter as he stepped into the circle of light cast by the glow of the fire. He held his horse's reins in his hands and the shape of the horse loomed behind him.

At once Danny was on his feet and racing round the fire to fling himself against his father.

'Don't be mad at me, Dad, oh, don't be mad at me!' he cried.

'I'm not mad,' replied Simon with a laugh as he ruffled the boy's hair with an affectionate hand. 'Not any more, that is. Why didn't you tell me you wanted to come on this ride?'

'I... I thought you wouldn't let me come. I thought you'd say no,' mumbled Danny. It was obvious that he was glad his father was there by the way he leaned against him.

'Well, you were wrong, Danny,' said Simon softly. 'I would have said yes.'

'You would?' exclaimed Danny.

'Sure I would. You see, I've been hoping that one day you'd want, to ride the skyline trail with me. Looks as if I'm going to see that hope come true, doesn't it?'

'You mean you're not going to make me go back with you? You're going to let me go all the way to Eagle Lake?' demanded Danny.

'That's right, and I'm going to come with you. I met Al on my way here and told him to go on down to the ranch. I'll take his place.'

As Danny whooped with joy Rhoda turned and glanced at Jessica across the flames of the fire. Her dark eyes gleamed a message quite clearly. It was, *I told you so.*

CHAPTER FOUR

AT a place where the unbelievably clear water of a mountain spring tumbled over smooth shining stones, Jessica sat on a boulder of pinkish-coloured rock. She was fishing. At least, she held a fishing rod in her hand and a coloured feather attached to the end of the line was floating daintily on top of the water. Otherwise she wasn't sure what else she was supposed to do to catch a fish.

But she was enjoying sitting there in the sunshine, imagining that once many years ago her grandmother might have sat there, soaking up the peace and beauty of this Valley of the Good Spirit. That was the name Joe Trip, translating from the Cree language, had given to the amazingly green valley hidden high among the mountains, and the quiet serenity of the place did give the impression that only good and pleasant things could happen there.

They had arrived there late the previous afternoon after a tortuous ride along a trail which had zigzagged across a wasteland of smashed stone to a narrow ridge of rock. In single file they had ridden across the ridge with the wind singing in their ears. Far below them, beyond steep slopes of brown shale, tiny lakes had glittered like sea-green jewels thrown down on a carpet of deep green. In front of them mountains had seemed to come at them like waves of brown and grey, row after row of them. Further away, higher peaks pinnacled in snow had shimmered mysteriously among purple cloud shadows.

It had been like tightrope-walking in the sky, thought Jessica, but it had been worth risking the danger to reach the narrow entrance to the valley—a slit in a forbidding wall of rock—and to see at last the beautiful Eagle Lake which had gleamed like silver in the early twilight of the high country.

Camp had been set up, and aching in every limb yet exhilarated because she had at last reached the lake about which her grandmother

had talked so lovingly, Jessica had been glad to climb into her sleeping bag and snuggle down to sleep on the canvas camp bed in the tent she shared with Rhoda and Cindy.

With a whole day to spend in the valley they hadn't risen early. Breakfast had been a late, leisurely meal and afterwards Cindy, Danny and herself, armed with fishing rods and a packed lunch of corned beef sand- wishes, had set out to explore the shores of the lake while Rhoda and Jan had taken one of the canoes which were lying upside down near the cooking shack and had paddled lazily down the water to the far distant end.

Turning, Jessica shaded her eyes against the lake's amethyst and silver glitter. There was no sign of the red canoe. There was no sign either of Danny or Cindy, who had gone upstream in the hope of having more luck with the fishing. For a while she had heard their voices, Danny's high with excitement, but now there was only the tinkle of water over stones.

She frowned a little, the pleasant drift of her thoughts disturbed. It seemed impossible to think of Danny without thinking of Simon. Yet ever since Simon had walked unexpectedly into the circle of firelight the night before last she had been doing her best to ignore him and keep aloof from him, aware of what Rhoda must be thinking and determined to prove her wrong. Simon had not come on the trail ride because he was interested in having an affair with one Jessica Howard.

It had been easy to keep aloof from him because, almost as if he too were trying to prove Rhoda wrong, Simon hadn't gone out of his way to show any undue interest in anyone. Taking Al's place, he had ridden at the rear end of the single file along the trail and when they had stopped to camp he had done Al's job of unsaddling, feeding and watering the horses as well as helping Joe to erect the tents. Almost

as taciturn as Al, he had spoken only when spoken to or to give some curt instruction to Danny.

He was as aloof and inaccessible as the mountain peaks, she thought, yet it was impossible for her to remain unaware of, him, just as it was impossible for her to be unaware of them.

A tug on her fishing line alerted her, and glancing down, she saw it was taut. Surprise leapt through her. Was it possible she had caught a fish? She laughed a little and scrambled off her rock, and standing on the edge of the shingle shore she began to wind the reel; slowly the line came in. Its end emerged from the bubbling water, and on the hook wriggled a small glittering fish.

Not sure what to do next, Jessica stared at it as it swung gently to and fro, its tail flicking desperately.

'The general idea is to remove the hook from its mouth.'

Simon spoke behind her, mockery rippling through his quiet voice, and she swung round to stare at him.

'How long have you been there?' she demanded. He was leaning with lazy grace against the trunk, of a fallen tree, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

'Long enough to see you reeling in,' he replied, pushing away from the tree trunk and walking towards her. 'Looks like it's the first time you've caught a fish.'

'It is. And now that I've caught it I wish I hadn't. It looks so helpless, poor little thing.'

He slanted a derisive glance at her from eyes which were as clear and grey as the water in the stream.

'It is kind of small,' he murmured, and caught the line with one hand. With a few deft movements of his fingers he had removed the hook and held the slim fish between a finger and thumb. 'Want me to throw it back?' he asked.

'Will it live if you do?'

'Sure it will, no damage done.'

'It's very pretty.'

'A rainbow trout. The lake is famous for them. They make a tasty meal, but I guess you'd need a lot this size.'

'Then please throw it back. I'd hate it to die uselessly,' Jessica said, and he tossed it back into the bubbling water. 'My first and last try at fishing,' she added with a sigh as she finished reeling the line in.

'Are you giving up so easily?' he enquired with surprise.

'I'm not used to killing anything, I suppose,' she replied in self-defence. 'And it's very odd. When Cindy gave me the rod after showing me how to lay a fly on the top of the water, it never occurred to me that I'd be killing something by fishing.'

'How do you think you'd survive in a wilderness like this if you didn't hunt or fish? You have to kill to get something to eat,' he scoffed. 'Pemmican doesn't grow on trees or rocks.'

'Pemmican?' she repeated, placing the fishing rod on the rock where she had been sitting. 'Whatever is that?'

'A sort of hard cake made from strips of meat that have been dried, then mixed with melted fat. The Indians invented it as a way of preserving the meat of the caribou and big-horned sheep they hunted. They showed the white trappers and explorers who came west how to

make it, and it comes in useful when you're on a long journey in the wilderness because it's easy to carry.' Simon came forward to lean against the rock, his hands flat against its sun-warmed surface. 'But first you have to catch and kill the animal to get ' the meat,' he added, still scoffing at her. 'When survival is the name of the game you can't afford to be squeamish or soft-hearted about hooking a fish or shooting a rabbit.'

'But there must be other foods that grow and can be eaten;' she argued. 'I've heard that it's possible to eat some of the lichens. And there must be all kinds of berries and fungi.'

'So there are at certain times of the year, usually at the end of August, provided you know which ones won't poison you. But come the winter and you have to be a good shot with either a gun or an arrow or be able to set snares.' His glance flickered mockingly over her face as she grimaced in distaste. 'A soft town-bred girl like you wouldn't last a winter out here,' he drawled, deliberately provocative.

'Oh, how can you tell?' she retorted. 'I'm a lot tougher than I look and I have all sorts of inner resources you don't know about. You shouldn't judge me by my appearance or by the background I come from. I think you're very prejudiced.'

'Sure I am,' he agreed with a fleeting tantalising grin. 'Particularly against young widows with honey- brown hair and peach-coloured cheeks, who have a way with boys,' he added insinuatingly. 'Ten-year-old boys.'

Jessica turned sharply to look at him. He was closer to her than she had realised and his remarks about her physical appearance made her very much aware of his..

He was without his hat and under the brilliant light of the sun his black hair had a bluish sheen. Curving across his forehead and about

his ears to touch the collar of his shirt, it was a dark frame for his broad-cheekboned, straight-nosed face. From under his level black eyebrows his light eyes watched her warily while his broad-lipped mouth tilted tauntingly to one side.

Her glance shifted away from his mouth to the strong brown column of his throat down to the V of dark hairs revealed by the casually buttoned faded grey shirt he was wearing. Sparks of light glinted from the silver buckle of his belt and the dark blue jeans he was wearing were taut across his flat stomach, lean hips and heavy rider's thighs.

She looked away quickly, out to the bright shimmer of the lake, to the thin sharply-pointed trees that stabbed upwards from a small island, looking anywhere but at the man who was so near to her as she fought against a tide of desire which had risen swiftly and alarmingly within her. Never before had she felt like this. Never had she wanted to reach out to touch and caress firm sun-bronzed skin without being invited, not even during the time she had been married to Steve.

'What do you mean by that?' she asked as coolly as she could.

'You're quite a hit with Danny,' Simon replied quietly. 'He did nothing else but talk about you after that ride on Saturday. He really appreciated your invitation to come on the trail ride—so much that he defied my authority and came after you.'

'Are you by any chance blaming me for his defiance of you?' she queried angrily, turning to look at him again.

'I am,' he replied dourly. 'Danny is a sensitive kid. He's gullible and easily led astray.'

'He's lonely, starved of affection and in need of friends, anyone can see that,' she flung at him.

'Is this where you tell me he needs a mother?' he sneered.

'No, it isn't! Oh, surely you don't think that I...' She broke off and fought to control the sudden furious shakiness of her voice. 'I wouldn't dare to tell *you* that,' she added.

'Wouldn't you? I am surprised,' he jeered. 'You've dared to tell me that I don't give him enough affection. Why not go further?'

'Because you're so suspicious and prejudiced about women that you'd think I was angling to be Danny's stepmother,' she retorted.

'And you're not?' he asked, still with that air of mocking surprise which made Jessica want to strike out at him.

'No, I'm not. Being a stepmother must be one of the most difficult jobs in the world.'

'Only if the child can remember its real mother, and Danny can't,' he replied, suddenly serious.

'But he knows about her. She's been kept alive in his mind by other people.'

'By Lou's parents. They doted on her and they dote on him. They've talked about her to him deliberately, building her up in his eyes and at the same time making out that I was a rotten husband and that I'm an even worse father.' Simon's voice grated with bitterness, and she felt pain stab through her as she empathised with him, seeing the situation from his point of view. 'They would like him to go and live with them in Edmonton,' he added dully. 'He wants to go.'

'Then why not let him?'

'To do that would be like admitting I'm making a mess of bringing him up,', he retorted, his face stiffening with pride.

'It would be better to sink your pride and let him go than to stop him from going and ruin the relationship between the two of you completely so that- he'll run away from you,' she said.

He stared at her with eyes which were slitted against the bright glare of the lake behind her.

'You're doing it again,' he accused softly.

'Doing what?'

'Showing too much concern. Why should you care what happens to Danny? In a week you'll be gone from here, so why get involved?' His voice grated harshly again as if it hurt him to reject her concern.

'You're right,' she sighed, and turned away again from his intent, puzzled stare. The smooth bluish- green water seemed to glitter with sparks as she saw it through the tears which gathered unexpectedly in her eyes. It was perfectly beautiful and she would never see it again after today. 'Why should I get involved?' she mumbled, then obeying a sudden urge from within added impulsively and without reserve, straight from the heart, 'Oh, I wish I didn't have to go back to England! I wish I could stay here through the autumn and the winter and see the spring return.'

Simon didn't speak, but she was conscious of his nearness again, of the sturdiness of his body as he leaned against the rock beside her, of a vigorous sensuality held lazily under control. She had only to move slightly and her thigh would come into contact with his, the corner of her shoulder would nestle into his chest. Then she would only have to turn her face towards him, offer her lips invitingly...

Heavens! What was happening to her? Jessica blinked rapidly and stiffened her body which had become relaxed and sensuous, wanting to be caressed. The lake, the island, the tall trees, thick and green on the far shore, the soaring snow-dazzled peak of a mountain, hard and glittering against a blue sky, became sharp and dear again. Once more she heard the incessant tinkle of the stream and the hunting cry of a solitary bird winging across the lake.

Then Simon moved, pushing away from the boulder and stepping round to face her, crunching the shingle under his boots. His bare brawny forearms folded across his chest, his legs braced apart,, he stared at her curiously, his eyes still narrow and intent.

'Do you like it here?' he asked. 'Not just here at the lake, but out here in the backwoods, among the mountains away from the city?'

'I love it,' she said sincerely. 'I only wish I had time to see more, go on other trail rides, perhaps cross to the other side of the mountains. I expect it's something to do with my grandmother's family having once lived and farmed in this part of the country, but I feel at home here. Do you find that strange?'

He shook his head.

'The spirits speak to you,' he replied, and in answer to her puzzled glance he continued, 'That's something my grandfather Sam Benson believed in. He used to say that if the spirits of a place speak to you you should make your home there. It's an Indian belief. Perhaps that's what's happening to you. Do you feel you could live here?'

'Yes, very strongly.'

'Then why don't you stay?'

The question confused her because she had never considered it before, and had never seen herself making such a violent change in her way of life. For the last two years she had followed a carefully planned routine so that she wouldn't have a chance to feel, believing that once she started to feel again she would be vulnerable to hurt.. Now she was feeling she would like to live in this country, and be always with this man.

'How can I?' she queried rather wildly. 'How can I stay here when I have to work for my living? I'd have to get a job, and that isn't easy if one hasn't been offered. I'm not an immigrant, only a visitor to this country.'

'I could employ you,' he interrupted curtly, obviously impatient with government rules and regulations.

'You?' she exclaimed.

'Sure.' His mouth took on that tantalising slant and his eyes shone with sudden secret laughter. 'I need a personal assistant and that's your line of business, so you told me in Edmonton.'

'Now you're making fun of me,' she accused crossly, and picked up the fishing rod, intending to walk away from him and his jeers, but his hand was on her arm, quick and strong, pulling her round to face him again.

'No, I'm not,' he insisted, continuing to hold her arm, his hand rough against her smooth skin. 'Not really. I guess I used the wrong job description, yet in a way it fits the job I can offer.'

'What is the job? Not as Danny's stepmother, I hope,' she retorted drily. And Simon grinned in wry appreciation of her remark.

'No. Right now I have a housekeeper. She cleans house, does the cooking and keeps an eye on Danny for me. Her name is Mary Trip and she's Joe's daughter.

She's getting married at the end of the month and going to live at Grande Cache in the forest reserve. I have to find someone to replace her, but so far I've had no luck. If I can't find anyone soon I'll have to let Danny go to his grandparents, and I don't want to do that because I have a feeling in my bones it would be wrong for him.'

He paused and rubbed at his cheek with one scarred hand, his face taut with the effort of trying to make himself clear.

'What I really want to say is this,' he went on. 'If someone like you were in the house when Danny comes home from school it would make a difference Mary's been all right, but she's a bit rough and ready for a boy like him. He needs someone who can be firm yet gentle, who can take an interest, in him and also stimulate his interest in what's around him, someone who can talk sensibly to him; someone like you.'

Amazed by his suggestion and scarcely aware that he had taken hold of her other arm, as if by doing so he could impress on her the urgency of his request, Jessica stared up at his dark, determined face. 'Oh, you don't know what you're asking,' she gasped.

'Yes, I do. I know too that it can't make much sense to you after the way I've behaved,' he said, and again he grinned rather wryly. 'I've been thinking some pretty mean things about you, Jess Howard.'

His remark took Jessica's breath away. It was as if he had swept aside a barrier which had stood between the proper meeting of their minds until now. For a moment she imagined how it might be if she took the job he had offered. She would become the woman in his home at the end of the day's work and he might not mind finding her here as

long as she didn't think she had any rights of possession if he should happen to show he appreciated her physical differences.

And judging by the way he was looking at her now he did appreciate her physical differences, in the same way as she appreciated his. ,

'Do you forgive me for being suspicious of you?' he asked. They were standing very close to each other now. His hands were still on her arms, the fingers tensing a little as if he were about to draw her against him; his head was tilted sideways as if he were about to kiss her. It would be easy to raise her arms, put them round his neck and touch her lips to his lean cheek in a gesture of forgiveness.

The longing to do so was there, an ache somewhere near her heart, an ache which was developing into a throb which beat through her body; the throb of desire which alarmed her with its sudden passionate violence so that she drew back, afraid of where it might lead her if she gave into it.

'Of course I do,' she replied coolly. 'It's natural for anyone to be suspicious of a stranger.'

'Then will you take the job so you can stay here and see the fall and the winter, be here when spring comes again?' he urged.

She was tempted, oh yes, she was tempted to throw caution to the winds and agree to be his housekeeper regardless of where such an arrangement might lead both of them. It would be a way of freeing herself for ever from the past to which her memories chained her. Here in this new and different country she would be free again to feel and possibly to love.

But to love again would be to be hurt again and this man had the power to hurt her, had already done so. She hesitated, frowned and

looked away from him. At once his hands slackened their hold on her arms and fell to his sides.

'You're not interested,' he stated quietly.

'Oh, I am.' She turned back quickly to him. 'But I don't think I can take the job. I appreciate your offer, but you see I...' She paused, searched for a credible reason for her refusal and found the usual one. 'I already have a commitment to James Marshall.'

Simon frowned, the level black eyebrows coming down over eyes which were suddenly as cold as ice.

'However did I come to overlook him?' he drawled with a touch of irony. 'Okay, forget I made the offer. I was only doing it for Danny. It was his idea. I told him I didn't think there was a chance in hell of you accepting, and I wouldn't have asked if you hadn't said you'd like to stay around here for a while.'

The barrier was up again and he had retreated behind it. Jessica felt regret flicker through her like a chill and had to make an effort to get close to him again, to retrieve a little of the friendship which had begun to grow between them.

'Danny?' she queried. 'You mean he asked you to ask me if I'd be your housekeeper?'

'That's right. You didn't really believe I'd thought it up by myself, did you?' he scoffed. Thumbs hooked in his belt, he had half-turned away from her and was scanning the thick forest that covered the hill, and she had the impression that he was regretting having made the offer of a job to her and trying to show he didn't really care. 'There's the eagle,' he murmured, pointing to a large bird circling above the hill. 'Someone must be on the hill, near his nest.'

'Danny and Cindy. They went up to try and find the source of the stream.'

'Time they came back. The sun will be going down soon behind the mountains. Twilight comes early to this place.' He gave her a wary glance. 'Danny's going to be disappointed when he knows you're not staying,' he added.

Was this another appeal, an oblique one, *to* her concern for the boy, giving her a chance to change her mind?

'Will you tell him now ?' she asked.

'Not yet. If I do he'll only pester you about it on the ride back. I'll tell him when you've left. It'll be soon enough.'

'Surely there's someone else you could ask,' she said.

'Not that I know of,' he replied coolly. 'What about Rhoda?'

His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

'You're not serious,' he remarked.

'Yes, I am. I know she's looking for a way to stay in Alberta now that she's back, and she has a lot of experience with children. Danny likes her, and she knew his mother, and...'

'Okay, okay, you've said enough,' he interrupted roughly, and his mouth curved unpleasantly. 'I know all about Rhoda's qualifications, but she'd want too much in return for her services.'

'More than you'd be able to afford to pay her?' she asked.

'No, more than I'd be *prepared* to pay her,' he replied drily.

'But I'm sure she'd be willing to take less..." she began to argue.

'And I'm sure she wouldn't,' he interrupted her again. 'She'd want to do it on her terms, and they wouldn't be mine. Now let's forget the whole business, shall we? I think I can hear Danny's voice. Can I trust you not to say anything to him about your refusal?'

'But what if he asks me?'

For the first time she saw Simon show hesitancy as he worried his lower lip with the straight edges of his teeth.

'Couldn't you say you're thinking about it?' he suggested rather diffidently.

'I suppose I could, but what good would it do?'

'Give me a chance to think up an alternative solution before he starts nagging me about going to Edmonton again. What with him, Lou's parents and my own mother, I have a hell of a time of it, so that sometimes I wish...' He broke off, his glance going to the edge of the forest. Danny and Cindy had emerged from it and Danny was running across through the long waving grasses towards them, shouting something in his high voice. 'Sometimes I wish I'd never met Lou,' Simon finished bitterly, then moved forward to meet Danny.

Once again with a terse remark Simon had revealed how unhappy his marriage had been, thought Jessica as she turned to pick up the fishing rod. How different his experience had been from her own. Not that she had been married for long, but those few short months with Steve had been pleasant, full of hope for their future together.

If only there was some way of showing Simon that marriage didn't have to be a relationship of strain, with each of the partners pulling in

different directions. If only she could show him that it was a relationship in which he could share his dreams and hopes with another person, and in return share her dreams and hopes. But how could she if he had, an aversion to marriage? How could anyone? Unless she or some other woman was willing to go and live with him first.

If she accepted the job as his housekeeper she would have the opportunity. The idea sprang up in her mind and startled her. Whatever was she thinking about? It must be this place, this Valley of the Good Spirit which was influencing her, giving her all sorts of crazy ideas.

Fishing rod over her shoulder, she hurried after the others who were already walking back to the camp-site.

Jumping and skipping at his father's side, Danny was in high spirits because not only had he caught some fish but he had also seen the eagle's nest.

'I'm glad I came after you,' he confided in Jessica, and she braced herself for the question she thought might come. 'Aren't you glad you came on this ride?' He didn't wait for her answer but asked, 'How many fish did you catch?'

She told him. He looked suitably disgusted, told her he had caught three and was going to share them with his father for supper.

By the time they reached the camp-site Joe was already cooking, the smell of his inevitable steak and onions filling the clear air with mouth-watering smells. Rhoda and Jan were back from their canoe trip. They had also caught some fish, so that with those caught by Danny and Cindy there was enough for *hors d'oeuvres* for everyone.

The lake lost its amethyst sheen as the sun's light was withdrawn, and took on a ghostly silvery gleam which continued to shine even when the sky was black. In the dark silence of the valley the flicker and crackle of Joe's small fire were signs of comfort and company, and they all clustered around it for a while after supper to listen to Jan's songs and sometimes to join him in singing them.

Joe suggested they turned in early so as to be rested and fresh for the long ride across the ridge and down to the camp in the amphitheatre, and obediently Cindy and Jess went to their tent. Rhoda stayed by the fire, and when Jessica looked back from the entrance to the tent she saw the girl Had gone to sit by Simon and was talking to him.

The night air was cold and she was glad to snuggle into her sleeping bag. For a Short while she and Cindy talked about the valley, the lake and the eagle, then Cindy fell asleep suddenly. Lying in the dark Jessica listened to the hooting of nightbirds in the forest and thought about Danny and Simon, wondering whether she had made the right decision in refusing Simon's offer of a job, wondering if she should listen to the spirits which spoke to her in this land and stay and make her home for a while; wondering whether she should give in to the physical desire which had leapt awake within her when she had been with Simon that afternoon.

She had never consciously wanted a man before. Her physical union with Steve had been the natural culmination of liking to be with him. Perhaps she hadn't known him long enough to want him in this primitive,' urgent way. But then she hardly knew Simon at all, so why did she feel this way? Was it, as Rhoda had suggested, the result of coming out of the deep-freeze in which she had existed since Steve had been killed? And was she ready for an affair with a man; an attractive, different man?

Groaning a little as she tried to ignore the cravings of her body, Jessica turned on her side and was surprised when Rhoda spoke out of the darkness.

'I thought you were asleep.'

'I don't feel very tired,' replied Jessica in a whisper.

'Neither do I.'

'Did you enjoy your canoe trip?'

'It was all right, I guess. Jan knows a lot about plants and birds and fish. I wouldn't have minded changing places with you.' Rhoda's whispering voice sharpened with envy.

'Oh, I did nothing. Only sunned myself, caught one fish by accident and day-dreamed a bit.'

'Not all the time. For a while you had Simon for company. I saw you both as we paddled past. Jan and I called out to you, but you were so engrossed in each other you didn't notice. Whatever do you two talk about?'

'Nothing very much. Today it was about Danny. Simon thinks he'll have to let him go and live with his grandparents in Edmonton—I think he's very worried about it.'

'He never said anything to me just now.' Rhoda sounded hurt. 'Why should he confide in you, a perfect stranger? Why didn't he tell me? I've known him the longest. I knew Lou. I could give him advice...' Rhoda's voice was rising rather noisily and there was a movement from Cindy's bed so that Jessica whispered urgently,

'Be quiet! You'll wake everyone up. I don't think Simon wants advice. He knows what he should do for his own child. He just needs

a little help in doing it, that's all. From what I can make out he gets plenty of advice from Lou's parents as well as his own mother, and none of it's helping him.'

'Lou's parents have never liked him, for obvious reasons,' murmured Rhoda, quietening down. 'He took their only child away from them. Lou married him against their wishes. Not that she needed their agreement because she was over eighteen, but she was always very dependent on them emotionally.'

'I suppose that's why she had difficulty in living away from them,' said Jessica. 'But what about Simon's mother? What's she like?'

'Ha!' Rhoda's laugh was sharp. 'Grace MacLeod, as she is now, is a very domineering woman. She divorced Grant Benson because she couldn't agree with him over the education of their sons. She got the custody of Simon and his brother and sent them away to a posh boarding school in Ontario. Simon ran away from the school and found his way back to his father, and I believe there was a good deal of wrangling in court before Grant eventually got the custody of Simon. But even after that Grace was always interfering. It was on her insistence Simon went to university. She couldn't and still can't understand his preference for the way of life on a ranch. And if she's handing out advice about Danny, I guess she's still interfering.'

'Hoping to make of his son what she couldn't make of Simon,' said Jessica with a sigh. 'I think we'd better get some sleep.'

'I suppose so,' muttered Rhoda with a yawn. 'But don't think for one minute you've put me off the scent with your red herring about Danny. There's something going between you and Simon, and I am to make sure it doesn't come to fruition before we get back to the ranch.'

'Oh, don't be silly, Rhoda, and go to sleep,' retorted Jessica crossly, and turning over closed her eyes tightly and willed herself to sleep.

Dawn was a pale apricot-coloured light filtering through the canvas of the tent When she Was wakened by Joe Trip's shout to 'come and get it!' Cindy was already up and out, and all that could be seen of Rhoda Was a mop of silky dark hair.

'Come on, Rhoda, breakfast is ready,' said Jessica, her teeth chattering as the cold early morning air touched her skin while she was dressing.

Outside, she stood sleepily at the fire with the others and wolfed down Joe's excellent bacon and eggs, watching the colour of the light change on the lake, change from silver to amethyst, then change again to pewter grey as the sun was hidden by some fast-moving clouds.

'Dress warmly,' Simon advised her quietly as he stepped by her. 'We can't feel it in here, but judging by those clouds there's a pretty hefty wind blowing.'

Within half an hour the tents were down and folded. Then the saddles were put on the horses and the packhorses were loaded with the camping gear. Jan complained that his horse seemed to have a hump on its back which made riding it uncomfortable, so he was given the spare horse to ride.

Joe Trip took off his cooking apron. Wearing his old high-crowned, flat-brimmed hat, which Cindy had told Jessica was the sort of hat the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had once worn, a red kerchief round his neck, the knot at the back so that it was ready to pull up over the lower part of his face should the going prove to be dusty, and hand-sewn Indian moccasins on his feet, he was a distinctive if slightly old-fashioned figure as he checked the packhorses and their loads. He looked across at Simon.

'You want to lead, boss?' he queried.

'No. It's your trip. You lead the way, *neistow*,' replied Simon. 'I'll take one of the packhorses and bring up the rear.'

'What does *neistow* mean?' whispered Jessica, leaning forward from her saddle to ask Cindy.

'Oh, it's a Cree word for brother-in-law. It's a lovely word which can be used to include anyone who is a close friend,' replied Cindy in her usual calm way.

Joe put his chopping axe in a scabbard that hung from his saddle. He tied the halter of his horse to the tail of the spare horse, then leading the first pack horse by its halter he mounted his own horse and set off without another word. Trained by now to follow, Cindy rode in behind him, then Danny and then Jan until only Rhoda, Jessica and Simon stood in the clearing.

'You go next, Jess,' suggested Rhoda sweetly, but her bright smile was false. Dressed in a light quilted nylon jacket with a hood, her cheeks berry-red with the cold sting of the morning mountain air, she exuded that radiant confidence again and looked determined to get her own way.

'Wait, Jess,' Simon ordered, 'that cinch isn't tight enough.' As she looked down trying to see the leather girth that ran under the horse's belly to hold the saddle in position, he stepped forward to slip the leather strap further through the buckle, and she found herself looking down at the top of his hat and the slope of his shoulders beneath a jacket of tan velvet corduroy which had a white sheepskin collar.

He straightened up and looked at her with clear bright eyes.

"That's better," he said softly, his lips hardly moving so that there was no chance of Rhoda hearing what he was saying. 'I dreamt about you

last night,' he added, and Jessica quivered where she sat in the saddle. It was as if he had reached out a hand to caress her.

'I hope it was a pleasant dream,' she answered lightly, looking away through the gap between her horse's ears but not really seeing anything because confusion was raging through her.

'Oh, it was, very pleasant. I guess it shows how much you're on my mind these days,' he drawled wickedly, and turning, strode over to his own horse. 'On you go,' he ordered briskly from the saddle. 'Both of you. I'll catch you up. If we don't move, Joe will be out of sight by the time we get out of the valley.'

As predicted the wind, was strong and cold. Jessica was glad of the quilted jacket that Cindy had lent to her in case they met such weather. Riding with her head down to avoid the handfuls of icy sleet which the wind occasionally flung in her face, she didn't have much interest in the awesome mountain scenery as she crossed the narrow ridge high in the sky. Again there wasn't much chance to socialise on this ride because the trail was narrow as it zig zagged across the wilderness of stone, and riding downhill had its problems as sometimes a horse's hoofs would slide frighteningly on the shale.

When the trail did widen Jessica found she had either Jan or Danny for company and sometimes both. Rhoda kept strictly behind, making sure that she was between Jessica and Simon, and perhaps she hoped to ride with Simon, although he didn't seem disposed to hurry and catch up with her.

Her muscles were slow after the day of rest to respond to the motion of horses and saddle, and by the time she reached the amphitheatre scooped out of the rock where they had camped the first night Jessica was stiff and weary.

But Joe had arrived far ahead of anyone else, and had his fire flickering and his cooking pails slung over it in the little cooking shack. The wild stream foamed white from the mountainside and the wind howled in the cracks in the rock. It was cold and they were glad of the comfort of the fire and one another's company.

Since it was their last night on the trail they had a sing-song round the fire and Joe told them stories about some of the *other* people he had taken on trail rides; and about his own boyhood when he had come up this trail with his Indian mother and her tribe, which at that time had still hunted caribou and sheep.

When they at last turned into the tents Jessica was glad of the two extra blankets on top of the eiderdown sleeping bag, and also for the warmth which came from a wood fire in a small tin stove that Simon had thoughtfully set up in a corner of the tent.

Next morning the wind was down and a blue sky above held promise of a better day. Even so they were late setting off, as if reluctant to return to the world below the skyline, and it took a long time for them to ascend the trail which wound up the mountainside out of the amphitheatre of rock.

By the time Jessica reached the top and paused to let her horse breathe, Joe Trip was far down the other side, weaving his way among the patches of shintangle and mountain heather with Cindy not far behind. Danny seemed to be having a few problems with Crackerjack and Jan was having to lead the pony by the halter-Looking round for one last stare at the skyline scenery, Jessica saw that it was dominated by one mountain that loomed up, terraces and chimneys of pale brown rock with snow glinting in its crevices.

As soon as she could catch up with Cindy she would ask the name of it, she thought, and kneed Snap forward. At that moment a movement and a squeaking sound from the fallen scree startled her.

Involuntarily her hand tightened on the reins, and irritated by the cruel bit Snap protested, rearing up, seemed to leap sideways in the air and came down awkwardly on all four feet on a slope of sliding shale.

A little shaken, Jessica sat still and talked to the horse to calm it and saw a little animal which looked half rat and half rabbit pop out of its hiding place among the rocks and scurry away busily, squeaking as it went. Gently she urged Snap forward, attempting to get back on to the trail. The horse moved awkwardly and she realised with dismay that he was limping. Once on the trail she reined in, slid from the saddle and bent to examine the horse's legs and hooves, trying to remember what could go wrong with them and cause the animal to limp.

The tinkling sound of shale being dislodged, the sound of a horse snorting, announced the arrival of Rhoda. She reined in and gave Jessica a sharp, suspicious glance.

'Now what are you up to?' she demanded.

'I'm not up to anything,' snapped Jessica, suddenly irritated with the woman for insinuating that she had planned Snap's lameness. 'I've damaged Snap. It was my own silly fault. I jumped when a small squeaking animal ran out from under a rock—I startled the horse and he shied. He can't walk without limping.'

'I suppose it was a pika or rock rabbit that startled you; Simon isn't going to be pleased. He's already in a filthy mood, and is having trouble with the packhorse that's thrown a shoe,' said Rhoda tartly. Jessica looked at her closely. Rhoda's dark eyes were blazing in a taut white face and her mouth was a thin red line. She was obviously very angry about something.

'Oh, dear,' sighed Jessica. 'Didn't you offer to stay behind and help him?'

'Yes, I did, and got sworn at for my pains. He's so damned bossy! Oh, I'm beginning to understand why Lou left him. He must be the original male chauvinist pig.'

'But Rhoda, how can you talk like that about him?' exclaimed Jessica in surprise. 'Aren't you in love with him any more?'

'I... I... oh, God, I don't know. I just don't know,' cried Rhoda, her face twisting with pain. 'All those years I've wasted mooning about a man who's never given me a thought in all that time.'

'Not wasted, surely,' said Jessica. 'Think of all the travelling you've done, the places you've seen, the children who have benefited from your teaching and interest in them. Think how happy you've been really, doing all that, probably far more happy than you would have been staying here and perhaps eventually marrying Simon. Can you honestly imagine yourself being contented to stay at home on the ranch, cooking and cleaning, looking after Danny and possibly another child?'

Rhoda looked down at her, frowning slightly.

'Now that you spell it out that way, I have to admit that I can't. I love my work, and even if I did get married I'd want to continue to do it.' She paused and stared consideringly at Jessica again, and a rueful smile curved her mouth. 'I guess you've given me something to think about. I'm not the domestic type, never have been, and I suppose that's the type of woman Simon wants, if he wants anyone on a permanent basis at all.'

'I suppose so,' muttered Jessica, turning back to Snap as the horse moved restlessly. 'Oh, I do hope he isn't too angry about Snap.'

'Well, you're soon going to find out, because I can hear him coming,' replied Rhoda. 'After the shindy I've just had with him I don't feel like facing him, so I'll just move on down the trail after the others. Give me a shout if you need any help and I'll come back.'

A little surprised by Rhoda's sudden decision to leave, Jessica watched her move off. The tail of the big palomino horse Rhoda was riding shimmered like yellow silk in the sunlight and then was lost to sight as the horse followed the downward twisting trail round an outcrop of scaly rock. Alone for a few moments, Jessica was glad that the day had warmed up and that the sun was now shining out of a cloudless sky. Far below beyond the slope of the mountain she could see a town, the houses like small coloured dots set beside the straight lines of roadways.

Again there was the sound of hooves, slithering on shingle, and Simon's white hat appeared, then the rest of him on the big black horse with the white blaze on its nose. The horse stopped obediently in answer to a pull on the reins, and turning in the saddle Simon tugged on the halter he had in one hand and spoke gently to the packhorse to coax it up the last part of the slope.

At the sight of the other horses Snap whinnied softly, and Simon looked round. One hand went to his hat, which he shoved back from his brow. The other went to his hip.

'Now what?' he drawled exasperatedly.

'Snap is limping,' said Jessica in a small apologetic voice, and went on to explain what had happened, ending with a humble, 'I'm sorry.'

Simon didn't say anything, but swung off his horse and pulling the reins down over its head in front so that it wouldn't wander far came across to Snap. Going down on one knee, he ran experienced, gentle fingers over the animal's legs. The horse winced and staggered

sideways when the probing fingers found a tender spot on the left hind leg.

'As you guessed, a strained fetlock,' muttered Simon as he stood up. He pulled off his jacket, rolled it up and went over to tie it behind the packhorses. His narrowed glance went up to the sky and then came down to survey Jessica. 'Good thing the weather is fine and looks as if it might stay that way. It's a pretty long walk from here to the ranch,' he said, pulling the brim of his hat over his eyes again.

'I suppose it is,' replied Jessica weakly, her glance going to the sturdy boots on her feet, thankful that Molly had lent them to her. Even so it wasn't going to be comfortable walking in them because they were a little too big and had a tendency to slip up and down on the backs of her heels. 'How long do you think it will take me?' she asked, looking up at him again.

He stared at her for a moment, glanced at the sky again and then past her down the slope of the mountain. She couldn't be sure because the shadow of his hat brim fell across most of his face, but she thought his mouth and a taunting curve to it.

'It'll depend on how good a walker you are, and how many stops you make. I'd say it'll be dark before you get there. You'll have to lead Snap all the way and give him plenty of rests,' he said.

'I see. Then I'd best get started, hadn't I?' she replied, going over to Snap and taking hold of the reins. 'Perhaps if I could catch up with Joe when he stops for lunch I could ride the spare horse, the one with the hump.'

'Perhaps you could,' he agreed smoothly. 'Where's Rhoda?'

'She's ridden on. I expect she'll tell Joe what's happened and he'll wait for me.'

'I wouldn't count on it. He knows I'm with you and that we've some camping gear with us should the worst come to the worst and we can't get back. He has to get back to the ranch today because he has to prepare for another trail ride. He's taking a party up to the Tonquin Valley tomorrow, so he'll be hurrying.'

The relief Jessica had felt because he had said he would be with her on the way back was followed by consternation at his suggestion that they might not get back to the ranch until the next day.

'I do hope we don't have to spend the night out,' she blurted anxiously.

'Does that mean you don't trust me?' he enquired.

'Oh, no! It isn't that,' she assured him quickly. 'But James will be arriving at Molly's cottage this evening and if I'm not there he'll be worried.'

'Ah, yes, James,' Simon drawled mockingly. 'I'm always forgetting about him. Anyone would think he's more than your boss, the way he worries about you when you're missing. Is he more?'

The question was accompanied by a sharp searching glance. Jessica returned it coolly, wondering why he was spending precious time talking here, high on this rocky wasteland where sunlight sparkled on stone and three horses snorted and stamped when really they should be following the trail downwards to the alpine meadows, thence to the forest.

'James is a very good friend as well as ray boss,' she replied calmly, once more, looping her hand through Snap's reins as a way of showing that she was ready to set off. But Simon made no move.

'Like "personal assistant", the phrase "a very good friend" could cover a lot,' he insinuated.

'Well, it doesn't cover what you're thinking,' she retorted.

'What am I thinking?' he countered.

'You're thinking what you thought when you saw him kissing me goodnight in the corridor at the hotel in Edmonton, and you're as wrong now as you were then. James is not my lover,' Jessica asserted coldly.

'But he'd like to be,' he suggested tauntingly.

'No, he wouldn't.' She glared at him. 'He's not like that.'

'Not like what?' her tormentor persisted.

'He ... he's very conventional. He believes in doing everything the correct way,' she replied, avoiding his eyes.

'Meaning he believes in marrying the woman first,' he said drily. 'Is he going to marry you?'

'I... it's none of your business,' she retorted weakly. 'Isn't it time we went on our way instead of standing here talking about James?' she added, giving him an irritated look. He was still perfectly relaxed, his hands at his belt, apparently in no hurry to go anywhere.

'You brought James into the conversation, I didn't,' he replied, his mouth curving in a wicked grin.

'Oh, I do believe you're deliberately delaying us.

You don't want us to catch up with the others,' she exploded accusingly.

'Now why would I do something like that?' he remarked mildly, shaking his head slowly from side to side as if amazed by her suggestion. 'If you want to start walking there's nothing to stop you. I'll be right behind you, not in such a hurry as you are because I care about the horses, and going downhill isn't going to be any fun for the packhorse, which has two shoes missing now. Nor is it going to be fun for Snap with that strained fetlock. So I'd be obliged if you'd watch how you go, Mrs Howard.'

While he was speaking his face had hardened and _ his voice had taken on a cold severity. Feeling abashed by his reminder about the injury to Snap, Jessica looked once more down the slope of .the mountain. To follow a trail while sitting on the back of a horse which knows its way was easy, she realised. To find and follow that same trail on foot without anyone in front of her to lead the way was quite a different matter.

She looked back at Simon. He was still standing in the same position, watching her from beneath the shadow of his, hat-brim, and she had the feeling he could guess very well what was going through her mind.

'Well? What's stopping you now?' he drawled. 'I'm not.'

Now she was sure he was deriving a certain sadistic pleasure in tormenting her because she was a woman., and she felt a sudden flare of dislike for two women she had never met, his dead wife Lou and his mother; for she suspected it was his experience with both of them which had resulted in his attitude to all women.

'Nothing is stopping me,' she replied smoothly. 'I'll see you later.'

Snap was reluctant to follow her, but remembering that talking gently to a horse usually worked Jessica stroked the animal's back and spoke

softly to him, all the time urging him forward. At last he moved limpingly along the trail in the direction that Rhoda had gone.

Out of a hard blue sky the bright sun shone, beating down on a field of grey, and brown rock which looked as if it had been blasted by dynamite. Walking across it was very different from riding across on the back of a tall horse which knew its way. Jessica had become used to watching the horizon and looking about her. Now she had to watch every step she took and saw only the world of stone around her.

It was hard going, and as she turned a hairpin bend in the trail she found herself facing the sun. It glared in her face and she could feel it scorching her skin. Stopping when she found a place where Snap could stand easily, she searched in the saddlebag for protective lotion to smother her face, and then removed the V-necked woollen sweater she was wearing and which made her too hot. Looking behind, she saw Simon coming round the bend, sitting astride his black horse with careless grace and turning back to watch the packhorse. He seemed to be uninterested in what she was doing.

Taking up Snap's reins, she coaxed the horse into continuing along the trail, remembering what she had once said to James about Simon being chivalrous. How mistaken she had been, she thought ruefully. If he were really chivalrous he would have offered to let her ride his black horse and would have walked himself. But then that wouldn't have been fair because it was her fault Snap was injured, not his. He was only treating her as an equal, as someone he thought could cope, and so perhaps she could feel complimented and not piqued by his indifference.

But why should it matter what Simon Benson thought about her? After today she would never see him again. Plodding on, Jessica found herself remembering their first meetings and her feeling of regret when she had thought she would never know why a boy called Danny didn't have a mother, nor why Simon's hands were scarred.

Now she knew the answers to both questions. She knew much more too, so there should be no feeling of regret when she said goodbye to Simon this evening. That was, if they said goodbye this evening and didn't have to spend the night in the forest.

Jessica looked at her watch and saw with a shock that it was almost two-thirty. No wonder she was feeling hungry! She stopped and looked around. A small stream tinkled its way down the mountainside. On its banks two small grey animals were playing and tussling with each other. They dashed up the slope of the scree with a strange galloping movement and then stopped to play again, making shrill squealing sounds.

Snap edged over close to the stream and drank gratefully from it. Watching the horse drinking Jessica realised how parched her throat was and went down on hands and knees to scoop water in her cupped hands and drink from them. When she stood up she felt the back of her right heel burning, and knew that a blister was developing.

The sound of hooves on shale heralded Simon's approach. He drew rein and slid out of the saddle, and also knelt beside the stream to scoop up water. When he stood up, he pushed his hat back and stood, hands on hips, to look down at her. The front of his shirt was open for coolness and drops of water glinted on the skin of his chest, fallen there from his hands when he had been drinking.

'How are you doing?' he drawled.

'Not badly, but I'm hungry. Shouldn't we be near where we stopped for lunch the other day, on our way up?' .

'Nowhere near it,' he replied, his glance going to the two small animals which were still playing on the sun-warmed rocks. 'Have you seen the two marmots?' he asked, and pointed to them.

'I wondered what they were. They're very noisy.'

'They're whistling,' he explained. 'It's that sound which gave a mountain near here the name of The Whistlers.'

Again there was no urgency in him. He looked as if he could stay there all afternoon and tell her about the mountains.

'If you're hungry, why don't you eat your sandwiches?' he said. 'This is as good a spot as any for the horses to browse and for us to eat.'

It was a small basin hollowed out of the rock by the stream where some spruce trees had found enough warmth and moisture to make a small wood. Simon lit a small fire and set a billycan of water over it to boil for coffee, and soon Jessica was sitting on a fallen tree, sipping hot sweet liquid from an aluminium mug.

As soon as she had finished the drink she stood up and started to collect the few utensils they had used. She washed them in the stream.

'You're in a hurry,' drawled Simon. He was sitting on the ground with his back against a tree trunk, his legs crossed before him, a picture of indolence.

'Haven't you any idea of time?' she asked him rather crossly.

'Sure I have. I watch the sun. I'd say it's going on for three-forty, maybe quarter to four.'

Jessica looked at her watch. It was exactly a quarter to four and it had taken them over an hour to eat their sandwiches, make coffee and drink it, yet neither of them had done much talking.

"You're right," she said, equably without surprise. "And that means we should be on our way. We'll never get to the ranch before dark if we don't."

"We're not going to get to the ranch before dark, period," he retorted. "The sooner you accept the fact the better. Even if Joe has left the spare horse at the place where he and the others stopped for lunch and you can ride it, we're not going to make it from there through the forest before it goes dark, and I'm not prepared to risk these damaged horses along the forest trails in the dark."

"Then I'll just have to go by myself, won't I?" she replied. Turning away, she began to walk over to the horses. Unfortunately the rest hadn't done her blister any good. The boot rubbed against it, and even though she tried she couldn't walk without limping.

As she pushed the mugs they had used and the billy-can into the canvas bag, she found Simon beside her.

"What's wrong with your right foot?" he asked casually. "Blister?"

She nodded as she fastened the strap of the canvas pack.

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" he persisted.

"I didn't think it mattered," she replied coolly. "It isn't much."

"But it'll be more if you go on walking," he said. "You can ride Blackie and I'll walk the rest of the way."

She turned to face him and found him too near. The tanned, hair-sprinkled skin of his chest only partially revealed by the half-buttoned faded shirt, the strong pulsing column of his throat, the taunting curve of his lower lip, the shadowed gleam of his eyes all affected her senses, exciting them to such a pitch that she had to step back quickly, out of danger.

'It's kind of you to offer me your horse, but I'll manage, thank you,' she said stiffly.

'Don't be so damned silly,' he growled at her! 'You won't manage. And don't think for one minute I'm lending you my horse because I'm sorry for you. I'm not. I'm just protecting myself.'

'From what?' she exclaimed in puzzlement.

'From your boss,' he admitted with a wry grin. 'I don't suppose he'd be pleased if you're returned to him in a damaged condition. Now I'll go and put your saddle on Blackie.'

When she was settled on Blackie's back she looked down at Simon as he finished adjusting the stirrups.

'Supposing I go ahead without you?' she couldn't resist asking.

He looked up, shrugged his shoulders and his eyes glinted with amusement.

'I should care,' he remarked ironically. 'It won't be the first time I've walked back alone along a trail with a damaged horse or camped out in the mountains by myself. I know the way.'

Jessica's shoulders slumped slightly, and she nibbled at her lower lip as she thought of the deep gloom of the forest, imagined it becoming gloomier with the approach of night.

'Does Blackie know the way back to the ranch?' she asked hopefully.

'Pretty well. But go easy on him, I wouldn't like to finish this trip with three damaged horses and one damaged woman. That wouldn't do the reputation of the Lazy R any good at all.'

The sun had already slipped behind the bulk of the western wall of mountains when Jessica at last reached the Open stretch of alpine meadow across which she had to ride to reach the pass that led to the forest.

With the going of the sun and the onset of mountain twilight the air grew cooler, and she had to stop and dismount to take out her shetland sweater from the saddlebag. When she pulled it on she stood for a while easing her stiff muscles and looking back to the slope of mountain which had taken her most of the afternoon to descend. Very faintly she could see the movement of two horses. Presumably Simon was walking along with them.

Mounting Blackie again, she rode on across the wide expanse of humpy ground avoiding small outcrops of rock, utterly dependent now on the horse's sense of direction. Not having a narrow marked trail to keep to, she found it very unnerving and could only hope that Blackie was going in the right direction and she would eventually reach the bastions of rock which marked the entrance to the pass.

Above the sky was pale primrose streaked with rose- tinted feathers of cloud, yet the alpine meadow was shadowy and seemingly endless. Soon she heard the sound of water rushing over stone and knew she was approaching a stream. She remembered crossing a stream on the way to Eagle Lake on Sunday, but had thought it was nearer to the entrance to the pass. Yes, she was sure she had crossed only one stream when riding over this desolate expanse of rock and shale.

At the stream she reined in and looked about in puzzlement. On the other side of it there was no wall of rock, only more stony ground stretching away to a dim shadowy distance. Was it possible that Blackie had gone off course and she was too far down?

Fear shivered through Jessica. What should she do? Wait here hoping that Simon had seen the direction in which she had strayed? Or

follow the course of the stream uphill until she came to the place where she was sure they had crossed it on Sunday?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE chill of the evening wind that whined across the wilderness of space, the weird shapes of shadows cast by outcrops of rock, the fluttering of leaves of the shintangle and the vaguely sinister sounds which she imagined were made by unseen animals stampeded Jessica into a decision. She would follow the stream uphill.

After letting Blackie drink she remounted and turned the horse to face upstream. In response to her whispered urgings he began to plod upwards reluctantly, his feet sliding a little on loose stones. In the saddle Jessica sat tense and upright, looking about her hoping to see the other two horses led by a man on foot come towards her.

Ragged dark clouds were scurrying across the sky by now, and some dipped down to obscure the tops of mountains and whirl about pillars of rock. Feeling very lonely, Jessica admitted miserably to herself that she was lost, and what was worse, Blackie was lost too. By deciding to follow the stream upwards she had disorientated the animal.

She peered at her watch. In another hour and a half it would be completely dark. Before darkness shrouded everything she had to find the entrance to the pass or spend the night alone on the mountainside.

'You're supposed to know the way, Blackie,' she whispered *to* the horse, and reined in to see what he would do when he was allowed to please himself.

To her surprise he stepped into the stream and began to drink again.

Looking at the rosy glow which was coming from behind the dark bulk of the mountains to her right, Jessica decided she couldn't go wrong if she crossed the stream because she would be going more or

less south, so she urged the horse into the bubbling water, praying it wouldn't slip on a smooth stone and fall. He went willingly and soon they were on the other side with another expanse of soggy meadow stretching away *to* a rim of dark rock.

'Where now, Blackie?' she asked, and as if he understood every word the horse plodded onward, stepping carefully through clumps of heather. Once a startled bird swooped up in front of the horse's hoofs and flew ahead for a while close to the ground, flaunting its white tail-feathers before diving beneath another patch of low-creeping evergreens.

The sunset glow from behind the ridge of mountains went out as if doused by a bucketful of water. All colour faded from the sky. The mountains grew blacker and were soon absorbed into the scurrying darkness of the sky. Blackie stumbled several times as if he could no longer see where he was going, and each time Jessica held her breath in case he had damaged a leg or a hoof.

Suddenly the horse stopped and snorted, then let out a loud whinny. From out of the shadows in front came an answering whinny and then another. With a toss of his head Blackie moved forward, changing direction slightly. Jessica smelt wood-smoke and her heart bounded. Ahead of her she could just make out the orange-red glow of a fire and the pale wreath of smoke rising from it.

Simon was a black silhouette against the glow of the fire as he moved towards her.

'What took you so long?' he asked scoffingly, his hand on Blackie's neck, patting it soothingly as the horse nuzzled him. 'I thought you'd be through the pass and halfway through the timber by now.'

Never had she been so glad to hear anyone's voice. She wished that like the horse she could nuzzle against Simon, feel the comfort and welcome of his hand against her head.

'I... I... got lost and followed a stream, thinking it was this one,' she said. 'I don't remember crossing two. streams when we came this way.'

"You were probably too busy looking at the view," he mocked. 'Okay, get down. Dinner is just about ready.'

But Jessica couldn't move, because suddenly she was shivering with cold. The woollen sweater was no proof against the breeze that swept down the mountainside.

'I ... I ... c ... can't move yet,' she replied through chattering teeth.

'You should have stopped to put on a jacket,' he chided her sternly. 'We're still high up and the temperature dropped a while ago.'

'I ... I didn't notice. I was too worried. Oh, Simon, you've no idea how glad I am to see you,' she cried.

'Yes, I have. I've been lost, too, up here. Come on, now swing your leg over. I'll help you.'

His hands were at her waist and somehow she was out of the saddle and being held against him while she continued to shiver. His arms were warm and hard and the soft sheepskin that covered the revers of his corduroy jacket tickled her *nose*.

'It's reaction as much as cold that's making you shiver,' he murmured, and she felt the hardness of his jaw against her head. 'Come over to the fire. There should be some coffee ready by now. A good hot drink and a blanket around you will work wonders.'

'Not only was she cold, she was also stiff and saddle- sore and was glad of his arm to support her as she hobbled to the fire. She sank gratefully on a block of wood placed close to the fire, Within seconds a rough blanket was draped round her shoulders, and Simon was offering her a mug of steaming coffee.

'Wait,' he ordered as she was about to raise the mug to her lips. He took a leather-covered flask from the capacious pocket of his jacket and unscrewed the silver top of it. Tilting the mouth of the flask over the mug, he poured some liquid into it.

'What is it?' Jessica asked.

'Snakebite oil,' he replied.

'What?' she gasped.

'Whisky to you,' he said. 'I think maybe I've earned a drink too after that walk.' He tilted the flask to his mouth and drank. Then, screwing on the top, he returned the flask to his pocket. 'Now, drink up. Could you eat some stew?'

'I could eat anything,' she said dreamily, and sipped her coffee. It had a fiery tangy taste to it and she could feel it burning its way down inside her.

They ate stew from aluminium dishes with spoons as they sat side by side on the block of wood, and as warmth spread through her and made her relax, Jessica felt deliciously drowsy and had to resist a longing to lean her head against Simon's arm.

'The stew is good,' she sighed.

'Out of a can,' he replied.

'What? No pemmican?' she teased.

'Not this trip. What would you like for dessert? A can of peaches or a can of peaches?'

'A can of peaches, of course,' she replied with a laugh.

They shared the can between them, drank more coffee, then Simon collected up the mugs and dishes they had used and went away to wash them in the stream. Coming back, he added some more wood to the fire and sat down beside her again.

'Joe left the spare horse here, that's why I stopped and made camp,' he said. 'I couldn't find any sign of you having been here and guessed you must have got lost. I was pretty worried about you, and I could only hope you'd have enough sense to let Blackie find the way.'

'If I'd let him have his way I might have got here sooner,' she admitted. 'Ooh,' she gave a little shudder, 'it was eerie out there in the twilight! I was imagining all sorts of animals were about, thought I could hear them.'

'You could. There'd be big-horn sheep peering at you from the top of some rock, a rock rabbit or two jumping about and maybe a ptarmigan shuffling about under the shintangle.'

'A bird did fly out in front of Blackie. It had white tail feathers.'

'That's the ptarmigan,' Simon confirmed, and laughed suddenly. 'You're incredible,' he said.

'What do you mean? Don't you believe me?'

'Yes, I do believe you, it's just that I find it hard to believe you're a woman.'

'Well, really!' Jessica gasped. 'What do you think I am?'

'Hell, now I've made it worse, haven't I?' he said ruefully. 'What I'm trying to say is that you're different from any woman I've ever known.'

'You've known so many?' she teased.

'A fair number,' he retorted.

'And what makes me different from them? I've always considered myself to be an average sort of person, no distinguishing marks or outstanding qualities, just an ordinary common or garden variety,' she said, determined to keep the conversation light.

'Well, when I told you that you had to walk back to the ranch you didn't start to cry or moan, nor did you butter me up to get me to lend you my horse. I don't call that ordinary common or garden behaviour,' he replied.

'Should I have done? Would it have worked if I'd cried or buttered you up?' she challenged, and watched his mouth curve into a smile.

'I guess not. I'd have just been more exasperated. Then on the other hand you didn't throw your weight about like some women I could mention, and start to abuse me when I didn't offer you my horse immediately,' he went on with a touch of grimness. 'You accepted the situation as it was and behaved as if you could cope with it.'

'That's because you treated me as if you expected me to cope,' she replied. 'And I thought I could ... only when it began to go dark and I didn't know where I was or where you were, it came to me then how big this land is, how easy it would be to be lost, and I ... I was afraid.' Her voice shook and she shivered a little.

Simon put his arm round her shoulders and drew her against him. At last she was able to lean her head where she wanted to, against his shoulder.

'Being afraid is nothing to be ashamed of,' he murmured comfortingly, as he might have talked to Danny. 'It's something that happens to us all at some time or other.'

'I can't imagine you being afraid of anything,' she muttered.

'What are you trying to do? Boost my ego?' he taunted with a laugh. 'I can be, and have been, afraid many times. I remember only too well the first time my father told me to get on the back of a wild horse and break it in. I was as scared as hell.'

'But being afraid didn't stop you from doing what he said?' she queried.

'No, because I was more afraid of displeasing Dad,' Simon said with a reminiscent chuckle.

'I know that feeling too. I used to feel the same when my father asked me to do something. It was because you were fond of him that you didn't want to displease him.'

'That's right,' he replied. 'He was a great guy, and taught me everything I know about animals and the land. He was passing *on to me what* his father and mother had passed on to him.'

'A heritage you'd like to pass on to Danny?' she suggested.

'I'd like to if I can, but I guess I'm not doing a very good job,' he shrugged bitterly. 'You talked to Rhoda about him, didn't you?'

Jessica nodded. 'Yes, I hope you don't mind. But how do you know?'

'She offered her services this morning, after you'd ridden off.' This time his laughter was sardonic. 'As I'd guessed, her price was too high.'

'What was it?'

'She wants to move in and take over ... the marriage bit. Unlike you, she fancies the job of being Danny's stepmother.'

'And you refused her?' Staring at the red heart of the fire, Jessica saw again Rhoda's white face and taut mouth.

'I did.' He spoke in a hard flat voice. 'I'm not going- through that tug-of-war again.'

'Marriage doesn't have to be like that,' she objected. 'It wasn't for me.'

'It was for me and for my father,' he retorted. 'And it would be again for me if I married Rhoda.'

'What about your grandfather and your grandmother?' Jessica challenged, wanting to find an example of a close and happy marriage near at hand.

'That was different. My grandmother was a very special sort of woman. Everyone loved her,' he argued, gruffly But uncertainly.

'For a marriage to be happy it isn't enough for only one of the partners to love,' she persisted. 'She must have loved your grandfather.'

'If you go on like this I'll get the impression you're trying to convert me,' he mocked good-humouredly. With his right hand he took hold of her left hand as it rested on her knee, and touched the wedding ring with the blunt end of his thumb. 'What happened to Mr Howard?' he asked softly. 'Can you talk about it yet?'

His gentle, polite reference to Steve touched her, seemed, to click back the lock on the door behind which she hid her feelings about Steve, and she found she could talk about her marriage and did, there in the firelight, with his arm around her. She told him how she had known Steve two years before she had married him on her twenty-first birthday. She told him what had happened the day the news was brought to her that Steve had been killed in an accident on a construction site where he had been working as an engineer.

'I guess he was a pretty nice guy,' Simon commented when she had finished.

'I thought he was,' Jessica replied. Strange how easy it had been to tell him. Strange, too, how the memories of Steve didn't hurt any more. Now she could think of him just as someone she had known and loved for a while, in the same way as she would be thinking of Simon Benson next week when she was far away, beyond the vast expanse of land and ocean that lay between this place and England.

But she didn't love Simon Benson, so how could she think of him in the same category as Steve? She couldn't love him because she hardly knew him. Then why did it seem so natural to sit here in the firelight with his arm around her and her head against his shoulder?

'He was lucky too,' Simon mused softly.

'Why do you say that?' she asked in surprise, for he was here, vibrating with life while Steve was no more.

She turned her head to look at him. He had taken off his hat so she could see the glint of his eyes as he studied her face. Releasing her hand, he raised his own and touched her cheek in a gentle, hesitant caress.

'He had you for his wife,' he said, and she was suddenly fascinated by the movement of his lips. They came closer, approaching her mouth as if attracted by a magnet. They were cool and hard against her lips, yet they were hesitant too, as if he expected her to repulse him. His skin smelt faintly of woodsmoke and ,the bristles of his unshaven chin were rough and paper.

For a moment Jessica was still and breathless. What she had wanted to happen was happening. She recognised that she had been travelling towards this moment ever since she had laid eyes on Simon in the hotel at Edmonton. But her stillness was a challenge to him. His lips grew harder, more brutally possessive, pushing against hers insistently until she could no longer resist their demand and her lips parted.

Under the blanket still draped about her his hand groped exploringly. Beneath her sweater it pushed, and finding her shirt in the way he pulled that out of the waistband of her jeans. His hand was cool against the warmth of her skin as it slid up to her bare breast. His fingers probed tinglingly, and when she quivered in reaction his whole hand closed in a rough, bruising caress.

At once the passion which she had been trying to damp down flared within her. Recklessly, with a joyous abandon, she flung her arms around him to hold him close. Fumbling at the collar of his jacket, she managed to slide her fingers inside to stroke the smooth skin at the nape of his neck under the thick dark hair. The pressure of his body against hers increased. Taut with desire, he thrust his knee between her knees, forcing them apart.

For many minutes they clung to each other, kissing and fondling with an intensity beyond reason, both of them searching for satisfaction of the hungry cravings which gnawed within them. Then Simon withdrew suddenly, almost violently. Turning from Jessica, he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth as if in repudiation of what had

happened. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and clutched his head between his hands.

'That wasn't supposed to happen,' he muttered in a thick voice.

She didn't, or rather was unable to speak, so he went on in a low shaken whisper.

'God knows I've tried not to kiss you. I've tried not to want you. Can you believe that?'

'Yes.' How strange and croaky her voice sounded, like a hinge which needed oiling. 'I can believe it, because I've tried not to want you too.'

He glanced at her sharply over his shoulder, his eyes glinting in surprise.

'Have ... have I shocked you?' she mumbled, pulling the blanket closely round her, for the night wind was very chilly now and she missed the warm protectiveness of his arms and his body.

'In a way I suppose you have,' he admitted. 'I've never heard a woman admit to feeling like that before. Usually they cover up with some lie about being in love.' His -voice was' bitter and she guessed he was remembering Lou.

'Well, there isn't much point in my saying I'm in love with you, because you wouldn't believe me, would you?' she said, trying to be flippant about the whole thing yet feeling a strange desolation creep over her as a result of his withdrawal. 'After all, we're only strangers in the night,' she added in a whisper that sighed forlornly like the wind through the rock crannies.

'It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't lost yourself, if you'd gone on to the ranch as you intended, if we hadn't been stuck here in this bloody risky situation,' he said harshly, obviously still determined to

repudiate what had happened. He shook his head, raked fingers through his hair and laughed, a mirthless sound of self-mockery. 'Funny thing is I was half hoping it would happen. I even tried a few delaying tactics back there on the trail.'

'Oh! What were they?' Jessica was a little disturbed to think that he might have contrived the situation.

'I suggested you walked, knowing it would slow us down. I took longer than I should over lunch. Then I told myself not to be a fool and that I was only placing myself in a position where I could be trapped as I was once before, so I let you have the horse you didn't ask for to go ahead.' He paused, then added with another cynical little laugh, 'But here we are after all with one tent and one sleeping bag on a damnably cold night, and both of us suffering from sex starvation.'

His cynical attitude stung her. She stiffened and searched for a way to deal with it.

'Whose sleeping bag?' she asked coolly.

'Mine.'

'Where's mine?'

'I thought you'd be able to tell me that,' he retorted drily.

'Isn't it with the gear on the packhorse?'

'You know damn well it isn't,' he growled.

'I don't know that,' she protested. 'Oh, you'll be saying next that I deliberately lamed Snap and deliberately lost myself so that I'd have to stay the night out with you!'

'Didn't you?' he jeered.

'No, I didn't. It all happened accidentally or coincidentally, like everything else that's happened since I came to Alberta.'

'All ordained by fate, eh?' he mocked. 'Okay, have it your own way and prove to me you didn't plan this get-together in the mountains.'

'I'll sleep wrapped up in the blanket,' she replied coolly.

'You'll be cold even in the tent,' he argued gruffly.

'I'll wear all my clothes and lie in front of the fire,' she said. As a result of the deep and incomprehensible hurt she was feeling, her usual common sense and independence of spirit asserted themselves. 'You can have your sleeping bag and your tent all to yourself,' she went on with counterfeit sweetness. 'I wouldn't want you to feel you'd been trapped by me in any way.'

Simon turned sharply to stare at her. 'You're very prickly all of a sudden,' he accused.

'I think I have reason to be,' she said, keeping her head averted so that he couldn't see the trembling of her lips. 'You've done your best to smudge and spoil a wonderful experience.'

'You can't mean being kissed by me just now?' he exclaimed.

'No, I don't mean that. I mean the trail ride, all of it. The day at Eagle Lake to which I've looked forward so long, the riding of the skyline, the camp fires, and the singing, the views, the flowers, the animals. Oh, even being lost and finding you here waiting for me.' Her voice shook uncontrollably. 'It's been beautiful, like nothing I've ever known before, and I wanted to be able to remember it ... without being hurt by it. But you've spoiled it, not by kissing me, but by what you said afterwards.'

Elbows on his knees, head on his hands, Simon sat still and silent. The fire crackled sending up a shower of bright orange sparks against the darkness. A second later the glow was smothered in a swirl of grey smoke, as the wind swept across it. Shivering, Jessica clutched the blanket about her, and thought ruefully that it was hardly the night for sleeping out without the protection of a tent.

'I was trying to cool a pretty explosive situation by bringing it down to basic terms,' said Simon quietly.

'Well, you've certainly succeeded,' she retorted in a voice choked with tears. 'I wouldn't sleep in that tent with you now even if you begged me to.'

He stood up suddenly, picked up his hat and clapped it on his head, every movement he made expressing extreme irritation.

'Okay, you can have the bloody tent and sleeping bag,' he snarled. 'I'll do the jungling out and sleep by the fire.'

'No, you won't,' she replied firmly, 'I won't let you. It's my fault I'm here. I got lost, so I'll take the consequences. You don't have to make any self-sacrificing gestures on my behalf.'

'Self-sacrificing?' he exclaimed angrily. 'That does it!' And turning on his heel, he began to stride off into the darkness.

'Where are you going?' Jessica quavered anxiously.

'To fetch your saddle.' His voice was rough with offended pride. 'You'll find it makes a good pillow since you've chosen to sleep out.'

CHAPTER SIX

AN hour and a half later, numb and stiff, coiled in the blanket on the hard ground, her head resting against the smooth shiny leather of her saddle, Jessica admitted to herself that she had chosen badly. Lying by the fire to keep warm worked only if she was prepared to get up and put more wood on it. That meant she couldn't go to sleep, because as soon as she began to doze off the wretched fire died down and her limbs began to feel as if they were turning into blocks of ice.

It didn't seem to matter how much she shifted about, she couldn't find, a place on the ground that would adapt to the shape of her body. And when with the sound of the wind whistling in rocky crevices and the knowledge that beyond the firelight there was an open wilderness of rock, plus the tormenting ache of regret and frustration because she and Simon had quarrelled bitterly after they had been so close to each other, there wasn't any peace any more.

Groaning, she sat up and scrambled stiffly to her feet. Clutching the blanket about her, she staggered over to the pile of chopped wood Simon had left; She collected some of it in her arms and returned to throw it on the fire. As she did so the corner of the blanket which trailed over her arms dipped unnoticed by her into *the* heart of the flames.

Lying down again she shuffled about trying to get comfortable. A smell of smouldering wool puzzled her for a while, but it wasn't until she felt heat searing her left leg that she realised what was happening.

With a shriek she leapt to her feet and threw off the blanket. Looking down, she saw with a feeling of sickening horror that little flames were licking at the leg of her jeans. Quickly she began to unbuckle the belt at her waist intending to remove the jeans, and suddenly Simon was there, kneeling before her beating at the flames with his bare hands.

'No, no, don't do that—please, Simon, you'll hurt your hands again and I couldn't bear that, I couldn't bear it!' she cried wildly. 'Oh, help me get them off!'

He dragged the pants over her hips and legs but couldn't get them off because of her boots. Quickly he unlaced the boots and she kicked them off. The cold air made her skin pimple all over as at last, barelegged and without boots, she stood shivering and watched him take the smouldering jeans and blanket to the stream.

When he reappeared out of the wind-swept darkness he was still dragging the blanket, which was sodden with water. Heaving it up, he dropped it over the fire the sparks of which were now shooting up threateningly. There was a hiss and a cloud of smoke rose up, acrid and eye-stinging.

'That should put the fire out,' said Simon. 'Have you some more pants?'

'Y ... yes ... yes. In my saddle bag.'

'It's in the tent. Go and put them on and stay there.'

He spoke briskly, and Jessica obeyed at once, hobbling because she was so stiff and cold. She had to bend and crawl into the tent, which was the small one which Simon had shared with Danny and in which there was only room for two people to lie side by side. The flashlight was on and she was able to find her saddle bag easily. It was a different matter to undo the straps because her hands were shaking so much and she was beginning to cry, but at last she pulled out her extra pair of pants. She struggled into them, feeling the burn on her leg tingle as the denim rubbed against it.

Simon's sleeping bag was unzipped. She collapsed on to its warmth shivering and sobbing uncontrollably, hardly aware of him coming

into the tent until she felt his arms go round her. He pushed her back so that she was lying down on the bag, then lay down beside her, pulling her close against the hard warmth of his body. Her face against his neck, she continued to sob.

Gradually she stopped shivering and she lay against him exhausted, and only occasionally shaken by a sob. As she grew warmer a lethargy was overtaking her. Held like this she could go to sleep, very soon, but before she slept there was something she had to say.

'I'm sorry I disturbed you. Thank you for coming so quickly and trying to beat out the fire,' she murmured, moving her head back a little so she could see him by the oblique shaft of light shed by the flashlight and seeing only the glint of pale eyes in the shadowed face so close to her own.

'Like to tell me what happened?' he asked.

'I was cold so I got up and put more wood on the fire. The blanket must have caught fire and I didn't > notice until I felt it burning me,' she mumbled. 'I expect you'll think I was very careless.'

'Maybe you were, but on the other hand I shouldn't have let you stay out there. I should have made you come in here to sleep,' he replied. 'I was pretty mad at you and I thought it would teach you a lesson about what it's like to jungle out on a night like this with the wind whipping down the mountain and a grizzly on the prowl. I didn't think you'd stick it so long, I thought you'd be in here within fifteen minutes...'

'A grizzly!' she gasped, raising her head to peer at him. 'You mean there's a bear out there and you didn't tell me?'

'I saw signs of him when I arrived here. As it happens you were attacked by something equally if not more dangerous, and I could

have warned you about that too,' he said roughly. 'When I came out and saw your blanket burning I was scared as hell. You see...' His voice faltered and she heard him swallow hard. 'You see, I know what fire can do to flesh and bones. I saw what it did to Lou.'

She raised a hand to his shoulder and let it slide along so she could touch his jaw with her fingers in a shy gesture of comfort.

'You loved her very much, didn't you?' she said softly.

'What makes you say that?' he asked, taking her hand in his and moving it down to hold it in his warm grasp close to his chest.

"You haven't mentioned her very often but when you have you've been bitter as if she hurt you a lot. She couldn't have hurt you unless you loved her,' Jessica said.

'I thought I loved her once,' he admitted, 'but I didn't love her enough. If I had I would never have let her go back to Edmonton and live in that apartment. I'd have made her stay with me at the ranch somehow. I didn't love her enough. If I had she'd still be alive.'

'But surely you don't blame yourself for what happened to her?' she exclaimed. 'The lire that killed her wasn't your fault.'

Simon shrugged. 'No, but a lot of what happened before and which accounted for her living in the place was my fault. I should never have married her.'

'Why did you?'

'It seemed the right thing to do at the time,' he replied drily, and releasing her hand turned away from her to lie on his back. 'Are you all right now? Think you can go to sleep? It would be the best thing for you after a shock like that.'

He had closed the door on the subject of Lou, firmly and quietly, and she would never know any more.

'Yes, I think I can go to sleep, as ... as...' she broke off, hesitant about saying the next part. 'As long as you stay with me,' she added in a rushed whisper.

'Don't worry, with no blanket and no fire I'm not going very far,' he replied. 'I'll put my jacket and yours over us, and lying close together on top of the sleeping bag we'll manage to keep warm.'

Sitting up, he arranged the jackets, one over their legs and the other smaller one over the upper parts of their bodies. He lay down again on his side facing her, but made no attempt to touch her.

'If you turn over with your back to me you'll be less tantalising to this mere male,' he suggested softly, gentle mockery lilting through his voice as if he wanted to keep the situation cool still.

But his remark had the opposite affect on Jessica. Immediately she became aware of him physically, of the smoky, horsey smell of him, of the rough bristly feel of him even though he wasn't touching her; of his warm vigorous strength which so recently had lain against her; and she wanted to be back in his arms, wanted to feel again the pressure of his mouth against hers and the probing, tingling touch of his hand at her breast.

'It doesn't seem to matter what we do, we're not able to escape from each other, are we?' she whispered.

'Now you're not going to tell me your grandmother organised this,' he scoffed, 'or that fate had a hand in it. Come on, Jess, turn over and play it safe.'

'Supposing I don't want to?' she murmured, leaning forward a little so that her lips almost touched his mouth, so that he would feel her breath on his lips like a caress, and knew a strange little flare of triumph when she heard Simon draw in his breath sharply and shakily, although he didn't move.

'Have you any idea what you're doing?' he said tautly, and she guessed he was talking between clenched teeth.

All she wanted was to absorb some of the comfort and warmth that she knew he was capable of offering, but when she answered him it was with that flippancy with which she often covered her real feelings.

'Yes, I do know what I'm doing, but I didn't think you'd be so chicken.'

She heard Him catch his breath again, then let it out in a long shuddering sigh. Yet when he spoke his voice was also cool and taunting.

'Seems like my original estimation of you was right after all.'

"What do you mean?" She drew away from him, sensing his attitude had changed and had become menacing.

'You're one of those city girls looking for a roll in the hay with a rough out-of-doors type,' he jeered. 'You've been asking for it ever since we met. Well, now you're going to get it.'

Ignoring her frantic denial, he moved before she could, twisting over to pin her flat on her back against the yielding softness of the eiderdown-filled sleeping bag until she could feel the sharpness of rock beneath her shoulder-blades and the back of her head.

Desperately she writhed beneath him and glimpsed his eyes glittering with pale fire before he reached out a hand to click off the flashlight.

'No, Simon, no,' she managed to gasp, and then her breath was cut off as his mouth took hers in brutal demand.

His body was hard and heavy on hers. Beneath the sleeping bag the ground was even harder. Jessica felt as if she had been trapped between two rocks which were slowly squeezing the life out of her.

Silently she continued to struggle, because this ruthless domination of her body was not what she wanted from him, and had never wanted from any man. At last she managed to get a hand free, and feeling panic rising within her when he jerked undone the fastening at the waistband of her jeans, she scratched at his face.

Suddenly she was freed from the trap as Simon rolled away from her in a movement of violent repulsion.

'So who's chicken now?' he jeered breathlessly, and with a little cry of desolation because he hadn't offered her the love and comfort she had been seeking, Jessica turned on her side, presenting her back to him, biting oh the sleeve of her sweater to stop herself from weeping again as frustration raged through her.

Behind her she felt him settle down and pull the jacket up over her. He didn't touch her, but she could feel his warmth.

'I thought that might make you change your mind,' he mocked. 'Now, perhaps, we'll both get some sleep.'

She thought he might have chased sleep away forever, but surprisingly she did sleep, falling quickly into the deep black pit of oblivion that nature provides when the body and the emotions are exhausted.

When she awoke the tent was full of green filtered light and she was alone, rolled in the sleeping bag with only her -own jacket on top. For a moment she lay wondering sleepily where Simon was. She stretched her legs and the burn on her leg stung sharply.

All the memories of the previous night tumbled into her mind. They were so painful that she writhed with shame and misery, trying to hide from them by closing her eyes and turning her face into the softness of the sleeping bag.

Her lips were throbbing where Simon had bruised them with his and her back was sore where it had been pressed by his weight against the ground. He had punished her for tantalising him, and the method of his punishment would sear her consciousness for a long time to come. As he had said, she had asked for it!

Being close to the ground she could hear the horses stamping their hoofs restlessly. It was time to go, to leave the skyline trail and angle down through the pass to the thick crowding trees, to return to the ranch and sanity. By now James would be at the Crawleys' cottage, no doubt demanding impatiently of everyone where his personal assistant was and when she would be back.

She unrolled herself from the sleeping bag and crawled over to the saddle bag. Taking out her handbag she found her compact and opened it to peer at herself in the small mirror. She gasped a little at her appearance. Her hair was a gold-tinted tangle of brown silk, her cheeks were rose-pink from sleeping, her mouth was a smudge of darker pink and her eyes were a deep slumbering blue beneath heavy lids. It seemed as if the neat, smooth Jessica Howard who was James Marshall's efficient personal assistant had vanished overnight and her place had been taken by a wild, abandoned-looking woman.

She was doing her best to get a comb through her hair when the flap of the tent was pushed back.

'I'd like to get the tent down and packed.' Simon's voice was ice-cold. 'There's coffee and some more canned peaches for breakfast.'

'Thank you, I'll come and get them,' she replied, trying to match his coolness.

He wasn't by the small fire he had made when she came out of the tent, and for a moment she paused, looking round for him. The morning was grey and blustery with clouds, purple and white, rolling across the sky chased by the wind which lifted her hair and spilled it across her face.

Pushing back her hair, she walked awkwardly in her socked feet to the fire, helped herself to coffee and sitting down on the block of wood which served as a seat began to eat the peaches from the half-full can which Simon had left for her. When she had finished eating she found her boots and put them on, wincing a little as the right one punished the blister on the back of her heel.

'I'd like to take a look at that burn on your leg before we set off.'

He was there beside her, but Jessica couldn't raise her eyes any higher than the buckle of his belt.

'It doesn't matter,' she mumbled, 'it can wait until I get to Molly's place.'

'Don't be any more foolish than you can help,' he chided her roughly. 'Have it ready for me to look at by the time I've packed this tent.'

He moved away and she was able to look up then to watch him walk across to the packhorse. He seemed all ready to travel in his corduroy jacket and tilted white hat and was carrying the folded tent on his shoulder. Glancing in the direction where the tent had been pitched, she saw that he had left only her saddlebag there. She stood up and

limped over to it, and returning to the block of wood began to search in the bag for some antiseptic ointment she had brought.

She had the leg of her jeans rolled up and was examining the long ugly-looking blister which had developed on the calf of her left leg when he came back sooner than she had expected and knelt on one knee before her. He placed the long tube of ointment and the package of bandage he was carrying on the block of wood beside her, and lifting her leg in both hands turned it so that he could examine the blister closely.

'We have to prevent it from being burst so that you won't be scarred,' he said coolly. 'I'll smother it with this ointment and bandage it loosely for now, but you've got to promise me you'll go to see a doctor as soon as you can.'

'I promise,' she said faintly.

While Simon smoothed on the cream and wound the bandage round her leg, she dared to look at him. Intent on what he was doing, he was the same man she had met in Edmonton apart from the stubble of black beard that blurred the sharp angle of his jaw. Cold-eyed, he was remote, inaccessible, not wanting to be friendly and rebuffing the attempts of anyone trying to be friendly with a cool glance or a sardonic remark or even, as she had learned last night, by violent repulsing behaviour.

Now she knew why he didn't want to be friendly, particularly with women. He had been badly hurt by a woman and he wasn't going to take the risk of being hurt again. If anyone was going to be hurt it would be the woman who dared to love him.

Jessica caught her breath in pain as the memory of his violent rejection of her the previous night stabbed through her suddenly. He

looked up at her, his eyes flashing bright against the sun-darkened skin of his face.

'Did I hurt you?' he asked gently.

The irony of the situation made her want to laugh hysterically and cry out, *Ok yes, you've hurt me, and I'll never be the same again.* But all she said in a bright polite voice, was,

'No. I'm quite all right, thank you.'

His eyes narrowed sceptically.

'I think you'd say that even if you were going through agony,' he mocked. 'Is the burn throbbing?'

'A ... a little,' she admitted. 'But the ointment is easing it already, honestly it is.'

He gave her another sceptical glance and turned his attention to the bandaging again, and she watched the scarred hands moving thinking how gentle and considerate he could be. How well he could care for other people. That was what made his violent behaviour last night seem so strange.

He finished bandaging her leg, told her curtly to stay where she was until he had finished packing and saddling up the horses because he didn't think she should walk about on her leg too much. Crouched on the block of wood, she watched him moving about quickly and efficiently and slowly admitted to herself that she was in love with him and couldn't bear the thought of leaving him.

The spare horse, the one with the hump on its back, was a little uncomfortable to ride, but it knew its way through the pass and along the forest trail, which was just as well, thought Jessica, since she was

having to go first leading Snap behind her while Simon followed her on Blackie and led the now very lame packhorse.

When they had come up on Sunday morning the journey through the forest had been along a tree- tunnel of green light shafted occasionally by slanting yellow sunlight which had glinted on the shiny leaves of creeping plants.

Today the tree tunnel was gloomy. The air wasn't still and scented any more. Trees creaked and groaned under the lash of the wind, and the dead lower branches seemed to reach out to poke and prick deliberately at horses and riders.

At first the descent was slow and easy, but gradually it became steeper, and Jessica began to feel the strain in her thighs as she struggled to keep her seat in the saddle when the horse slanted downwards.

They stopped in a glade where a stream tinkled to drink water and to eat another can of fruit. Simon spoke only to ask her how her leg felt, and her answer to his question was all she had to say to him. Yet she wanted to talk to him, to spill out all her feelings of regret and shame, to make everything right between them before it was too late.

She couldn't find the right words and his cool indifference had the effect of silencing her completely, so they rode on through the dim grey forest until Jessica began to feel she had done nothing for hours but look at her horse's ears. The temperature was warmer, but she made no effort to remove her jacket. Tired and depressed, she was beginning to pull leather, holding on to the saddle horn in front of her because she was afraid of slipping out of the saddle.

At last the horse burst out of the trees into a green meadow where brown and white cattle were grazing. Ahead the red roofs of the

ranch house and its buildings glinted under the pale rays of the sun which had just broken through the clouds.

Al Curtis and another man were waiting at the stables to help unload and unsaddle the horses. It was Al who helped Jessica to dismount after having a few words with Simon.

'You okay, ma'am?' he asked anxiously when she reeled a little from weakness and saddle-stiffness.

'Yes, thank you,' she replied, forcing herself to be cheerful.

'I've got the hag you brought your clothes in, ma'am,' he told her. 'The folks down at Narrow Lake are expecting you, and the boss says I've to drive you there straight away in the jeep. I'll go and fetch it while you put your stuff in the bag.'

He walked away round the side of the barn, and standing on legs that shook, Jessica transferred her belongings from the saddle bag to her zipped holdall. When she had finished she looked around for Simon. There was no sign of him. The other ranch hand was leading Blackie away to pasture.

A movement near the house drew her attention. Mary Trip, in her dark pants and bright red shirt, was standing at the back door and pulling the washing line towards her, unpegging the clothes and dropping them into a clothes basket at her feet. Jessica half hoped Danny would appear, but no lovely skipping boy came out to wave to her.

Al drove up in the jeep and jumped out to scoop up her bag and put it in the space behind the seats. As she was about to climb into the seat next to the driver's, Jessica caught sight of Simon leaving the barn and start walking in the direction of the house, away from her.

'Simon!' she called, but her voice was faint because her throat was dry and aching. The time had come to say goodbye, and there didn't seem to be anything she could do to make everything right between them so that they could remember each other without shame or bitterness. Yet she couldn't leave him without saying something. She had to try. So she cleared her throat and limped after him.

'Simon, wait!' she called, and she was sure he must have heard her, but he didn't turn, he kept on going, covering the ground between the barn and the house with long strides that she couldn't match.

'Time we were going, ma'am,' Al urged from the jeep. •

Her shoulders slumping in defeat, Jessica climbed into the seat beside him. As the vehicle moved off she glanced back at the door of the house. It was closed. Mary Trip had gone. The whole house wavered and blurred before Jessica's tear-filled eyes. But the fact that she couldn't see properly didn't matter, because Simon had gone too, without saying goodbye.

She was glad of Al's shy silence as they bumped along the road to the highway, although she was aware that he glanced at her every so often from dark curious eyes.

The highway was busy with traffic, cars, buses, and huge container trucks racing along in the sunshine which had managed to break through at last to shine ,on the rolling green land and make the chromium bumpers of cars dazzle.

In comparison to the highway the road to Narrow Lake was quiet, dusty as usual, falling into the green valley where the blue lake gleamed.

There didn't seem to be anyone about outside the Crawleys' cottage, and as Al handed her the bag he looked worried.

'Sure you'll be all right, ma'am?' he asked.

'Yes, thank you. Thank you very much. Goodbye.'

'Guess you don't look too good, ma'am,' he persisted.

'Oh, I'll be fine when I've had a cup of tea,' she asserted, and saw relief gleam in his eyes.

'Okay, ma'am. Be seein' ya.'

He tipped his old brown hat to her, climbed back into the jeep and drove off. Heaving up her bag, Jessica hobbled painfully to the wooden steps which led to the verandah and clumped up them. She felt very queasy, and the burn on her leg was hurting horribly.

She was teaching a hand to the handle of the screen door when the inner door was pulled back. Rhoda appeared and pushed open the screen door, standing to one side to let Jessica enter the house.

'So you're here at last,' she said in a loud, over-jolly voice, then added more anxiously, 'My God, you do look a mess!'

Jessica was aware that the people who were sitting about in the living room were all staring at her and that one of them had risen from his chair and was coming towards her.

'Jessica, what on earth have you been doing?' James's voice sounded disapproving and anxious at the same time.

'Riding the, skyline trail,' she mumbled foolishly, and was glad he was there to catch her when her legs gave way suddenly and she tipped forward.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT was after lunchtime on Saturday afternoon. Jessica lay on a lounge comfortably padded with cushions, on the verandah of the Crawleys' cottage, and tried to read the novel that Molly had lent to her. She was wearing a pretty flowered dress with a scooped-out neckline, short puffed sleeves and a full gathered skirt. Her honey-brown hair was smoothly brushed and its ends just curled on her shoulders. Her left leg was bandaged heavily.

A grey squirrel darted up the trunk of the nearby silver birch tree, ran out along one of the branches which overhung the verandah and chirruped cheekily. Jessica looked up from her book and spoke to the animal which studied her with bright round eyes like black buttons before scurrying back along the branch and down the tree-trunk to scamper across the ground to another tree.

Framed by the curving trunks of the birches, Narrow Lake glittered blue and silver under the bright rays of the sun. The air was still, heavy with afternoon warmth, and the sounds of children splashing and shouting as they played in the water carried clearly, as did the rhythmic beat of country music coming from a transistor radio.

Jessica closed the book, leaned her head against the high back of the lounge. At once her gaze encountered the peak of a mountain, purple and silver glinting against the pale sky.

And she had believed herself to be alone and unwatched, she thought whimsically. Finding the mountains always there like omnipotent presences watching over the foolish antics of human beings was something with which she would have to come to terms if she lived here close to them.

But she wasn't going to live here near the mountains. Tomorrow, all being well, she and James would be on their way driving south

through the National Parks to Banff, on their way to Calgary and from there to England. They should have left today, but the doctor in Clinton who had examined the burn on her leg the previous afternoon had recommended that Jessica should rest comfortably for a whole day before undertaking a long car ride. He had also insisted that she should return to his office today to have the dressing on the burn changed and that tomorrow she should make an effort to reach Banff so that she could go to the hospital to have the dressing changed again, and another opinion given on the state of the injury by a doctor there.

Oh, what a fool she had made of herself, fainting into James's arms! And how dreadful she had felt when she had come to and had seen them all staring at her as she had lain on the chesterfield in the living room.

James's eyes had been sharp and suspicious. Rhoda's had glistened with mockery, Tom Crawley and Jan had looked frankly mystified. Only Molly and Cindy had looked kind and anxious, and it was Molly who had asked,

'What s wrong, Jess? Are you hurt in any way?'

Explaining how she had come to be burned had been difficult. She had had to leave out so much and be deliberately vague as to when it had actually happened and why. Rhoda had looked maliciously sceptical and had turned away to hide a smile, murmuring something to Jan, who had raised his eyebrows, and the two of them had moved away out of Jessica's line of vision. James, bless him, had controlled his obvious urge to ask demanding questions and had asked Molly where the nearest doctor could be found.

To Jessica's secret relief James had stayed behind at the cottage when Molly drove her into Clinton to see the doctor, but he hadn't been

pleased when she had told him on her return that she couldn't possibly drive south with him on Saturday as they had planned.

'If we have to go straight through to Banff it means we can't stay the night at Lake Louise as I'd hoped,' he had grumbled as he sat with her in the living room at the cottage on Friday evening.

'I'm sorry,' she had mumbled, 'I seem to have been an awful nuisance. If only that silly rock rabbit hadn't frightened the wits out of me I wouldn't have startled Snap, and none of this would have happened.'

'Wouldn't it?' James countered, giving her a sharp glance. 'Are you sure the horse was really lamed?'

'Of course I'm sure. He was limping, and Simon said he had strained his fetlock and mustn't be ridden.'

'And you took his word for that?'

'Well, what do you think?' she protested. 'Snap is his horse, and he knows so much more about horses than I do.'

'Exactly,' returned James. 'So how were you to know whether he was telling the truth about the horse! He could have been lying.'

'Simon wouldn't lie about anything to do with horses,' Jessica exclaimed. 'Oh, how can you think like that about him? You don't know him.'

'That's true, but I've been hearing about him, from Rhoda. It seems she's known him a long time.' James frowned, and leaned forward in his chair, his hands on his knees. 'She, told me earlier while you were at the doctor's that you and this Simon fellow seemed to be getting on very well, had a lot to talk about and spent most of the day at Eagle Lake together.'

Jessica stared at him in silence. He was jealous again, objecting to her association with another man, and she had wondered how he would react if she told him that Simon and the man she had met in Edmonton were the same person.

'I can't understand what has happened to you, Jessica,' he exclaimed suddenly. 'Ever since we set foot in that hotel in Edmonton you've been different. Twice in two weeks you've become involved with the sort of man I never imagined you'd even notice. There was that cowboy type in Edmonton and now this ... this horse-Wrangler. Whatever has happened to you?'

'Very little,' she replied. 'I've just got over Steve's death, that's all, and I'm beginning to behave and feel normally. I think coming to Alberta has helped. I feel free again and I don't want to go back to England, at least not yet.'

'Good God!' James was shocked. 'What will you say next? You have to go back. You're only a visitor here.'

'I know that. But I could stay if a job were offered to me.'

'But you don't need a job. You have one. You work for me—you're my personal assistant.'

'That doesn't mean to say you own me,' she replied coolly. 'I can stop working for you as soon as I like, as soon as I get back to England if I want to.'

He went pale and she felt pity stir in her and just a little remorse. After all, he had been good to her when Steve had been killed.

He stood up and began to pace restlessly about the room, hands in his pockets, clinking the loose change and keys in one of them, a habit which often grated on her nerves.

'Quite honestly, Jessica, if you do hand in your notice and leave me I don't know what I'll do,' he said rather pathetically, stopping to stand in front of her. "You're by far the best secretary I've ever had, and..."

'You'd find another easily enough,' she put in quickly. 'The world is full of good, efficient female secretaries. It's something women excel at.'

'Yes, but I doubt I'd find another you, and this is why I've been thinking seriously of asking you to put our relationship on a more permanent basis. Jessica, will you marry me?'

Very intent, very serious, he stared down at her and she wriggled mentally, not wanting to hurt him but knowing that it had to be done. For once she had to put herself first.

'James, you don't really want a wife,' she argued. 'You're only asking me to marry you because it would be convenient for you to have a personal assistant who couldn't give notice and leave you. It would be a marriage of convenience.'

'Yes, you're right, it would.' He seemed to realise he hadn't said the right thing and broke off to run an exasperated hand through his thinning, greyish-blond hair. 'Oh, I know it wouldn't be love's young dream come true, but you had that sort of experience when you were married to Steve. This would be quieter, a less demanding experience for you, I realise that, because I'm twenty years older than you are and. very involved with my work; but we could be happy, Jessica, I'm sure we could...'

'It lasted for such a short time,' she whispered forlornly, and he stopped speaking to stare at her in bewilderment:

'What did?' he asked.

'My love's young dream,' she replied. 'But I'm still young enough to hope that my dream will come true once more. Oh, James, do you mind if we don't discuss this any more? I'm tired. It's been a difficult day and I'd like to go to bed.'

Then, of course, he had been conscience-stricken and had fussed over her so that she had been glad when Molly had appeared, had sized up the situation with one shrewd glance and had offered her arm to Jessica to help her limp along to the room she shared with Rhoda.

Rhoda, Cindy and Jan had gone into Jasper to see a play being performed by a company of actors from Calgary in the Anglican church hall there, and Jessica had been glad of the chance to go to sleep before Rhoda came in. But she had been unable to avoid the woman this morning, for when she wakened Rhoda was up and dressed and just re-entering the bedroom carrying a cup of tea.

'There you are,' she said brightly, placing the cup and saucer on the bedside table. 'Doesn't seem like a week since we went up to the Lazy R together, does it?'

Tall and shapely, she looked sleek and attractive in a dress of flower-patterned silk jersey with her dark hair coiled round her head in smooth shining swathes. Her skin had a healthy tan and her dark eyes sparkled with gaiety.

'No, the time has gone very quickly,' Jessica replied, sitting up slowly. Her burned leg felt stiff and sore, the dressing on it sticky and heavy.

Rhoda turned away and started to fold up clothes and place them neatly in her suitcase. She glanced once or twice in Jessica's direction.

'Well, you certainly managed to pack a lot of experience into a few days,' she said insinuatingly. 'How did your night out with the ranch boss go? Come up to your expectations?'

'I didn't have any expectations,' Jessica replied as coolly as she could, and sipped her tea.

'Then you couldn't be disappointed, could you?' Rhoda retorted acidly. 'As I was.'

'Rhoda, I'm sorry you were, disappointed in your meeting with Simon. I realised you were hurt, but that had nothing to do with me. There's nothing going on between Simon and me.'

'Oh no?' Rhoda jeered. 'I don't believe you. I saw the way he looked at you when he thought no one was watching him. "The sidelong looks of love", I think one poet has called them. And I saw him talking to you as I've never seen Simon talk to anyone, not even to Lou.'

'But that didn't give you the right to tell James that Simon and I are ... er ... more than friendly," objected Jessica.

'All I did was answer James's questions about Simon.'

Khoda shrugged. 'Could I help it if he read more into my answers than was intended?'

She snapped the locks on her case shut and then came over to stand by the bed.

'I admit I was a little mad at you for a while, just for being here at a time I'd been looking forward to for months,' she said slowly. 'But now I'm beginning to realise that your being here has done me a good turn.'-

'Oh, really?' Jessica felt quite cheered. 'In what way?'

'If you hadn't been here, and if Simon hadn't talked to you about Danny, I mightn't have been pushed into suggesting that he and I should get married. Then I wouldn't have found out how I stand with him.' Rhoda turned one thumb down in an expressive gesture. 'Like that,' she added with a wry grin. 'I'd have gone on hoping he would turn to me in his hour of need, that sort of thing, hoping in vain as I've done all these years, and wasted more time and possibly lost an opportunity which had just turned up.'

'What is it?'

'A chance to study for a further degree, to get a doctorate in Education so that I can teach at University level. Jan is doing it and has suggested that I have a go. I'm going into Edmonton with him today to find out more and I won't be coming back here, at least not this summer.'

She stood up, picked up her two suitcases and walked over to the door. There she turned and looked back.

'You were right, so very right about me. I wouldn't be happy living on the ranch, doing the housekeeping and supervising Danny. I couldn't live with a domineering type like Simon. He's only for submissive women like you ... okay, okay! I'll shut up. Don't throw that cup at me. It's good china!'

Laughingly Rhoda ran out of the room, as in reaction to her taunt about being submissive Jessica threatened to throw the cup. She came back to peep round the edge of the door with a cheeky grin curving her lips.

'Nice knowing you, Jess,' she said. 'See you around, eh?'

Jessica sighed and smiled a little as she recalled her reaction to Rhoda's teasing. She picked up the book again and tried to read. Cindy, Tom and James had gone fishing and Molly was on the other side of the lake visiting one of her summer neighbours. She was glad to be alone, to be quiet for a while, and the warm summer afternoon was ideal for relaxing with some escapist reading.

If only she didn't have this ache of regret gnawing at her, because she would be leaving tomorrow without having been able to say goodbye to Simon properly. Not that she wanted to say goodbye to him. She wanted to stay with him. She wanted to take the job he had offered so she could stay with him. She wanted it more than anything else she had ever wanted in her life, with a passionate intensity which alarmed her because she had never considered herself to be passionate or intense before.

Did she only want to stay because she had to leave? Would the longing fade and die as soon as she had turned her back on Alberta, perhaps as soon as she had turned her back on Molly's cottage and was speeding south with James, her mind diverted by the sight of more awe-inspiring mountains, more lakes and waterfalls and slow-moving, encroaching glaciers?

Or was the longing to stay and be near Simon the result of something deeper? Was it really love she felt for him? And could the seed of love be sown and grow into a strong flourishing plant within the space of two weeks? Or was she suffering from brief sexual desire brought on by propinquity?

Again she sighed. She hadn't read one word on the pages in front of her, so she closed the book and dropped it to the floor. Raising her arms, she placed her hands behind her head and stared up at the tip of the mountain she could see glimmering in the distance, and

wondered how she could arrange to see Simon before she left without James knowing.

The sound of wheels crunching over gravel made her look down at the road. A vehicle was approaching the cottage. Its engine was noisy, and it was easily recognisable as a jeep through the cloud of golden dust which its wheels were churning up. It turned at speed off the road and came to a stop with a screech of brakes beside the Crawleys' station wagon.

A man wearing dark blue jeans, a red and white checked open-necked shirt and a big white stetson hat jumped down from the vehicle: At the sight of him Jessica's eyes opened wide and her mouth went slack. Was she dreaming, or was he really there?

Simon came straight towards the steps leading up to the verandah and walked up them, his head down, not seeming to see her. At the screen door he stopped and waited for a second before raising his hand to the bell- push. From inside the cottage came the ding-dong sound of the bell.

'There isn't anyone in,' Jessica croaked.

He stood very still and stared at the door. When he turned his head to look at her the movement was slow, almost reluctant. In the shadow of his hat brim his eyes were narrow and wary.

'I thought you'd left this morning,' he said.

'I ... we ... couldn't leave because the doctor in Clinton said I must rest my leg as much as possible. We ... we're going tomorrow.'

Her voice faded to a whisper. She wished she could stop staring at him. The muscles of her eyes seemed to be stuck in one position, so that she couldn't direct her glance anywhere else.

His glance drifted away from her face to her bandaged leg. The whiteness of jawbone showed through the skin as his mouth tightened.

'How is the leg? Bad?' he queried gently.

'Worse than I'd thought. It hurts a lot and the pain makes me very tired. But I expect you know all about it. You must have suffered a great deal when your hands were burned.'

His eyes flashed her a sharp glance and he moved forward to lean a shoulder against one of the posts of the verandah and face her.

'I got by,' he replied curtly, rejecting her interest. 'Is Rhoda about?'

'No. She's gone to Edmonton with Jan.'

'When did they leave?' he demanded.

'Oh, about ten o'clock this morning.' '

He frowned, and shifting position so that his back was against the post, he hooked his thumbs in his belt.

'Do you have any idea why she decided to go?' he asked.

'Yes. She said that an opportunity had turned up to study for a further degree, and she's gone to find out more about it. She said she wouldn't be coming back here this summer.'

'I see.'

He seemed suddenly very interested in his boots, and Jessica wondered if he were sorry that Rhoda had gone. Had he changed his mind about the woman? Was it thumbs-up for Rhoda after all, and had he come here hoping to see her, perhaps thinking that without

distraction in the form of a young widow from England he would be able to talk Rhoda into being housekeeper at the ranch without going through the formality of marriage?

Pushing away from the post, he turned away from her to rest his hands on the rail of the verandah and stare out at the glittering lake. Suddenly he slapped the rail with one hand in a violent gesture of irritation.

'Simon, is there something wrong?' she ventured anxiously. 'Can I do anything to help?'

He turned round to look at her, resting his hips against the rail and pushing his hat back from his forehead he folded his arms across his chest.

'Danny has run away,' he said flatly.

'Oh, no! Are you sure?' she exclaimed. , 'Pretty sure. He's been threatening to do it for some time. He threatened again last night, and this morning he went.'

'When he made his threat did he say where he might go?' she asked, thinking that Danny might have made his way to Edmonton.

'What would be the point?' he said scornfully. 'If you wanted to blackmail someone into doing something by running away would you tell them where you were going? It would kind of defeat the object to my way of thinking.'

'I suppose it would,' she conceded. 'I've no experience of running away.'

'Well, I have,' he retorted drily.

'What was he trying to blackmail you into doing?' she asked.

'He wanted me to come here,' he said curtly.

'To see Rhoda?'

'No.' The usual brusque negative, pushing her away.

'Then ... oh, I don't understand.' Jessica was suddenly impatient with his stiff unrelenting pride. 'Why did you ask for her?'

'I thought maybe she'd know where he's gone. He said something last night about getting help from Aunty Rhoda,' he said, bitterly. 'He could have gone with her and Jan.'

'But he wasn't with them when they left/ she argued, sitting upright. 'Surely you don't think...' Her voice faded into incredulous silence.

'Yes, I do think,' he retorted cynically. 'They could have picked him up at some prearranged place on the highway, possibly at the entrance to the ranch. He had plenty of time to make such an arrangement with Rhoda and I wouldn't be surprised if she's spiteful enough to get her own back at me by- agreeing to help him run away. Once he found out I wasn't going to do what he asked, all he had to do was be in the right place when she and Jan drove by.'

'Why did he want you to come here last night?' Jessica persisted.

He didn't reply at once, and the frown which pulled his eyebrows together and the tautness of his mouth expressed the struggle that was going on inside him. He was having a terrible time with his pride, she thought, with a sudden flash of affectionate understanding.

'It's all right to tell me, Simon,' she suggested softly. 'I won't give you away to anyone else.'

Surprise widened his eyes as he looked up. He stared at her in puzzlement for a moment, then slowly his mouth curved in a wry smile.

'Okay, I'll tell *you*. He wanted me to come here and ask you again to be our housekeeper,' he admitted. 'As _ soon as I set foot in the house yesterday he was at me, demanding to know if you'd accepted the job.' He gave her a wary under-browed glance. 'He seemed to think that staying the night out on the trail with you was an attempt on my part to persuade you to stay.'

'And what did you tell him?' she asked, feeling the blood rising to her face.

'Just what you'd told me, that you didn't want the job and that you were leaving today. I didn't realise he would take it so hard. He cried and shouted at me. He told me it was my fault you weren't staying.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'I couldn't help but agree with him that it was my fault, because you didn't like me enough to stay and be employed by me.'

'But that wasn't the reason why I refused the job,' she objected hotly.

'Wasn't it?' he jeered. 'But it would have been the reason if I'd come and asked you again. You'd have refused again because of what happened on Thursday night. Anyway, I told Danny there was nothing doing and that I wasn't going to come and ask you. So he threatened to run away. I refused again and he ran into his bedroom and locked the door. I figured he was going to cry it out in bed and that he'd be over his disappointment by morning, but I was wrong. When Mary went to tell him breakfast was ready this morning he'd gone, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he isn't nearly in Edmonton now.'

From the overhanging branch the squirrel scolded noisily. The leaves of the birches twinkled in a slight breeze and the water of the glittering lake lapped softly at the shingle of the shore. On the verandah there was silence between the two people who faced each other. Once again Jessica was searching desperately for the right words as she recognised that here was her chance to make her dream of love come true again.

But it was Simon who spoke first with a shrug of his shoulders and a wry twist to his mouth.

'I expect you're finding the situation ironical,' he shrugged. 'I'm here after all, as Danny wanted me to be, and you're here too. Looks as if you were right. It doesn't matter what we do, we can't escape from each other.'

'And we've both tried so hard,' she whispered.

'Perhaps we should stop trying. Perhaps we should let things take their natural course,' he said.

'What is their natural course?'

'I'd have thought you'd know,' he mocked. 'You're the one who's always talking about our meetings being organised by fate, and this particular meeting seemed to have been planned by some supernatural power. I never expected to find you still here. Yesterday we said goodbye...'

'No, we didn't. You turned your back on me and walked away. Oh, you were cold and mean yesterday,' she protested. 'I wanted to speak to you, I wanted to say goodbye, but you were all walled up behind that stubborn pride of yours.'

Again his eyes flashed bright against the sun-darkened skin as he gave her a startled glance.

'I didn't know -' he began, and broke off to rub his forehead with the back of his hand as if the effort of saying what was in his mind were too much for him. 'If I seemed mean and cold,' he went on in a low voice, 'you seemed stiff and superior to me. And I realised you had cause to be after Thursday night. I'd behaved pretty badly.'

'There must have been a reason,' she suggested gently, realising that they had made a sudden leap forward in their relationship. They were both actually explaining to each other how they felt.

'Oh, yes, there was a reason,' he replied with a dry laugh. 'The way you were cuddling up to me in the tent was a temptation I found hard to resist, and I had to cool it somehow. Words seemed to have no effect on you as they'd done earlier, so I had to frighten you. It worked, but I felt rotten afterwards.'

'But why did you have Jo cool it?' she asked.

'All part of my fight against the natural course of things, I suppose. You know, ever since you barged into my room at Edmonton I've wanted you and been struggling against falling in love with you. I've been protecting myself against you all the time.'

'Why?'

'Because I believed you were just playing around.'

'And then on Thursday morning, Rhoda said...'

'Oh, bother Rhoda!' she interrupted crossly. 'Why did she have to interfere?'

'I don't know, but when I refused her offer to be Danny's stepmother she told me she could see there was something going between you and me and warned me against you. It was the same warning I'd been giving myself all the time. She hinted that you were ripe for an affair with a man, and hinted that any man would do.' He paused, his face stiffening with pride again. 'I didn't want to be just any man to you,' he added quietly.

'But you're not, Simon, you're not just any man to me,' Jessica said urgently. 'I fell in love with you in Edmonton, only like you I've struggled against the feeling because it seemed so far-out, so ridiculous, to fall in love on first sight with a stranger.'

Simon pushed away from the verandah rail. Taking his hat off, he tossed it down on to the seat of the aluminium deck-chair beside the lounge. He sat down on the edge of the lounge close to her and at once all her senses sparked into life so that she longed to reach out and touch him. Instead she gripped her hands together on her knees and stared at the twisting fingers.

'What fools we've been,' he said softly. 'If we'd let things take their natural course you wouldn't have slept out by the fire and your leg wouldn't have been burned. You wouldn't have come back here yesterday. You'd have stayed at the ranch with me and Danny wouldn't have had any reason to run away. Going against the natural course of things only brings trouble, big trouble.'

'And that's another saying of your grandfather Sam Benson, I suppose,' she teased in an attempt to cover up the wild elation which was suddenly singing through her. 'But I'm glad Danny ran away. If he hadn't you wouldn't have come here this afternoon, and I'd have gone away tomorrow without seeing you again and neither of us would have known how the other felt.'

'Watch it, Jess,' he warned softly, leaning towards her. 'When you smile like that I have this very natural desire to kiss you.'

'Then why don't you let nature take its course?' she whispered, leaning towards him and offering her lips.

He didn't hesitate. Hands on her shoulders, he put his mouth to hers. His lips were warm, gently persistent, and his skin smelt of sunshine and soap. There were no bristles on his chin to scrape her skin. Her eyes closed, her lips parted and her body went slack with desire as his hand caressed her throat, then trailed downwards to curve round her breast. Fingers at the opening of his shirt, she slipped undone the third button which was fastened and slid her hands inside, feeling a tingle of sensuous pleasure go through her as she spread her fingers out against the firm, hair-sprinkled skin of his chest.

Breathless with the passion which flared through the two of them simultaneously, they broke apart, only to cling to each other again while the lounge creaked protestingly.

'You go to my head like strong drink so that I have no control any more,' Simon murmured, burying his face in the silken softness of her hair where it curved against her neck. 'You know what comes next in the natural course of things. Is it what you want, Jess, really and truly?'

'Yes, it's what I want,' Jessica whispered.

'Then will you come back with me, to the ranch?' he asked.

'To be your housekeeper?' she challenged.

'To be more, much more. To be my lover, my wife and, dare I say it? To be Danny's stepmother.'

She pulled away from him. Her hands on his arms, she studied his face. He returned her gaze steadily.

'Are you sure?' she asked. 'You don't have to marry me. I'd stay without any legal ceremony.'

'No.' He spoke tersely, and something very much like anger blazed in his eyes. 'I won't have you on those terms. I realise it must seem an about-face on my part after all I said to you about marriage. But that was said in self-defence.' His face tautened and his mouth took on a bitter line. 'I married once because I thought I had to, and I swore I'd never let it happen to me again. That's why I'm asking you to marry me before we go further in the natural course of things. I've a feeling you and I are going to be together for a long time, and I want our relationship to start openly and honestly.'

'So that you'll never feel you've been trapped?' she queried.

'That's it exactly,' he replied, smiling at her. He framed her face in his hands. 'Will you marry me, Jess? Soon, in the church in Clinton where your great-grandfather used to be vicar and where my grandparents were married?'

'Yes, I will. Thank you, Simon,' she replied, and suddenly overcome by her feelings, she flung her arms about him. They kissed again, and were so totally engrossed in each other that they didn't hear the sound of voices or the tramp of feet coming up the steps.

'Jessica! What are you doing now?' James sounded at the end of his rope.

Slowly Simon raised his head. For a moment he and Jessica stared at each other, then turned to look at the three people who were standing at the top of the verandah steps. There was Cindy, solid and placid as ever, fishing rod in one hand and a string of glittering fish in the

other. There was Tom Crawley, his round face flushed and embarrassed under his rather battered cream fishing hat. And there was James, thin and harassed-looking, seeming most un-Jameslike in Bermuda shorts and a thin cotton T-shirt, his fair hair covered by a high-crowned green cap with a large peak which jutted over his eyes.

'Hi, Cindy, Tom,' drawled Simon, rising to his feet.

'Good God!' exploded James. 'You're the cowboy fellow Jessica went traipsing about with in Edmonton. What are you doing here? And why were you kissing her just now? Jessica, if this man has been forcing his attentions on you, you must say so and we'll take legal proceedings against him.'

'Now wait a minute,' said Simon, moving menacingly towards James. 'What right have you to tell Jess what she should or shouldn't do?'

'I'm James Marshall and I'm her boss,' retorted James. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Simon Benson and I own a ranch near here. I've just spent a few days trail-riding with Jess and I'm going to marry her. You stopped being her boss about ten minutes ago,' returned Simon tersely.

'Oh, great!' exclaimed Cindy, smiling broadly and clapping her hands together. 'Congratulations, Jess, Simon.'

'Same goes for me.' Tom took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow and neck. 'You youngsters sure work fast these days!'

'Jessica, is this true?' demanded James.

'Yes, it is. I realise it must be a surprise to you,' she began to explain earnestly.

'A surprise? It's more than that, it's a shock!' he interrupted her irritably. 'Oh, I knew there was something funny going on, but ...' He broke off, rubbed his hand across his face and sat down suddenly, as if his legs had given way. He sat on top of Simon's hat. 'You can't do it,' he said fiercely. 'You don't know him well enough. You've only just met.'

'Look, Mr Marshall,' said Simon, in a more conciliatory way, 'I realise it must seem pretty strange to you, but I feel as if I've known Jess a long time, longer than two weeks. I know enough about her to want to know more, and marrying her so she can stay with me is the best way of doing that, to my way of thinking.'

James groaned and raked his fingers through his thinning greyish hair.

'That's all very well for you. What you don't seem to understand is that I feel in some way responsible for her. I brought her out here. But for me she wouldn't be here and you wouldn't have met her. Now what's her family going to say when I return to England and tell them that she's decided to stay here and marry a man she's only just met?'

'You don't have to tell my parents,' put in Jessica- calmly. 'I'll tell them myself. I'll phone them from here. Anyway, it isn't any concern of theirs if I decide to marry again—nor of yours, so you don't need to feel responsible, James. I'm an adult and can please myself what I do.'

'She's right, James,' said Tom, coming forward. 'Why be so concerned? You're not Jess's father.'

James winced, groaned again and closed his eyes.

'I know that, but I'm beginning to appreciate what it must be like to have a daughter,' he moaned. 'And you needn't be so smug, Tom

Crawley, you've got it coming to you when that Cindy of yours decides some other man is more important to her than you are. And I'm still going to be put through some sort of inquisition when I see Jessica's people again. They'll want to know all about you.' He opened his eyes and looked straight at Simon.

'Come on, Tom,' drawled Simon with a sudden disarming grin. 'Vouch for me. Tell the man I make a fairly good living running cattle and breeding horses.'

'Sure I can vouch for Simon, James. He's a good man to ride trail with or go hunting with; a bit on the quiet side, you know, not fond of blowing his own trumpet. You can tell Jess's folks he'll look after her,' said Tom steadily.

'I'll even take her to England to visit them,' added Simon. 'But not until the hunting season is over. Maybe for Christmas.'

'All right, all right, you win,' sighed James. He turned to Jess with a slightly rueful smile. 'I'm sorry, my dear. I warned you I'd play the heavy father. You know why, don't you?'

'I know why,' she said gently. 'I hope you're not too hurt.'

'Oh, I expect I'll get over it,' he said, his eyes twinkling with good humour again.

'What's going on around here?' Molly's voice came from the direction of the steps and they all looked over there. She reached the top of them and behind her came a boy whose face and hands were grimed with dust, and whose tangled mop of reddish hair glinted with orange sparks in the sunlight.

'Danny!' exclaimed Simon, stepping forward. 'Where the hell have you been?'

'Ah, don't be mad at me, Dad,' wailed Danny shrinking back behind Molly. 'I wanted to see Jess before she left to ask her to be our housekeeper, but I got lost coming here.'

'Now you can stop looking as if you'd like to give him the belting of his life, Simon Benson,' Molly intervened, and put a protective arm about Danny's shoulders. 'The boy is starved, and no wonder. He set off without breakfast at six this morning to come here and he's been coming ever since. I met him coming out of the bush down at the Turnbulls' place at the other end of the lake.'

'But how the hell could he get lost between here and the Lazy R?' demanded Simon. He looked very formidable when he was angry, thought Jessica, watching him with eyes in which her love for him glowed like blue fire. 'Come on now, Danny, tell the truth. Where have you been since six this morning and now?'

'I came over the fields and through the forest,' muttered Danny. 'I thought it would be quicker than by the road.' He lifted his shoulders in a shrug very like his father's and sighed. 'I guess I was wrong,' he added, shaking his head.

'You certainly were,' said Tom. 'I'd say you've walked about ten miles. That's quite a distance for a youngster like you. How about coming inside and having a shower while Molly makes you some turkey sandwiches?'

'Sounds great,' agreed Danny, his eyes lighting up.

Then he glanced uncertainly at Simon. 'Are you still mad at me, Dad?'

'Not as much as I was,' admitted Simon slowly. 'You see, I thought you'd run away to Edmonton and I was worried about you. Well, now you're here are you going to ask Jess what you wanted to ask her?'

Danny looked suddenly shy and shifted from one foot to the other as he looked at Jess.

'How come you're still here?' he muttered. 'Dad said you'd be leaving early this morning to drive to Banff.'

'I hurt my leg,' she replied, smiling at him. He smiled back hesitantly, shuffled his feet again and looked at his father.

'You ask her, Dad,' he mumbled.

'I have already,' said Simon softly. 'Jess is staying.'

'Yippee!' Danny began to dance up and down, all his shyness gone. 'Now I won't have to run away. Can I go and have a shower now, Mrs Crawley?'

'Of course you can,' replied Molly swinging open the screen door.

'Don't we have a couple of bottles of champagne hidden away somewhere in a cupboard, Moll?' asked Tom as he went to follow his wife into the house.

'Champagne?' repeated Molly, her quick eyes flashing from one person to another when she looked back from the open door. 'Why? What is there to celebrate? Is someone going to be married?'

'Right first time. Mum,' said Cindy with an admiring laugh. 'Jess and Simon. Isn't it fantastic?'

'It's more than fantastic,' exclaimed Molly. 'They've only just met.'

'Really, Dad?' shouted Danny excitedly.

'Really,' drawled Simon.

'Oh, great! Can I have some champagne too?'

'Not on an empty stomach, you blackmailer, you,' growled Simon with mock ferocity. 'Now go and get cleaned up.'

Danny smiled seraphically at Jess, did a hop, skip and a jump to show how happy he felt, and followed Molly and Tom into the house.

'I think I'll go and help Dad look for the champagne,' said Cindy to no one in particular, and once more the screen door opened and clanged shut.

James stood up looked round and saw Simon's hat.

'Oh ... er ... yes,' he muttered in an embarrassed way. 'I seem to have squashed your hat.'

'That's all right,' said Simon magnanimously. He was leaning against the rail of the verandah, thumbs hooked in his belt, seeming a picture of indolence until you noticed that his eyes were shining with a sort of secret laughter.

'I'd like to wish you and Jessica all the best, of course,' said James in his best crisp boardroom manner, offering his right hand to Simon, who shook it and smiled his thanks.

'I hope you'll be very happy, my dear,' continued James as he bent to kiss Jessica's cheek.

'I will, oh, I'm sure I will,' she whispered. 'And thank you for being so kind.'

'I think maybe I ought to go and help in the hunt for the champagne too,' said James, stepping towards the screen door. 'See you both later, I expect.'

The screen door clanged behind him. There was only the squirrel left, sitting on its haunches at the end of the swaying branch, its bushy tail upright, its front feet held against its chest as it scolded crossly.

'It wasn't too bad telling James, was it?' said Simon, moving away from the rail to sit down on the edge of the lounge again.

'No, but I'm glad you were here to do the telling,' she replied.

'Chicken!' he jeered, and leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

'I know,' she whispered, putting her arms about him so that he couldn't move away and rubbing her cheek against his. 'But I owe him so much, and I didn't like hurting his feelings.'

Holding her close, he nuzzled the silky fall of her hair.

'I owe him something too,' he told her. 'He was right. If he hadn't brought you with him to that conference, you and I would never have met.' His shoulders shook slightly as he laughed. 'I wonder if he's ever seen himself as Fate?'

'Oh, now you're making fun of me again!' she accused, pulling away from him so that she could see his face. His eyes were glinting with laughter.

'Do you mind?' he asked softly, stroking her neck below her ear, letting his fingers slide insinuatingly beneath the soft smooth hair to caress her nape. 'I can assure you I only make fun of people I love very much,' he added, his black lashes dipping down over his eyes as he glanced provocatively at her mouth. 'Now, where were we when we were rudely interrupted by your ex-boss?'

'Right here,' she whispered, twisting her fingers in his black hair. 'Oh, Simon, however are we going to wait three weeks? I love you and want you very much.'

'We're going to wait because it's going to be worth waiting for, I'm going to make sure of that,' he said softly. 'Do you trust me?'

'Yes, I trust you,' and she drew his head down until their lips met in a kiss of passionate promise.

On the end of the branch the squirrel continued to chatter. A faint afternoon breeze made the water lap on the shore of the lake and fluttered the leaves of birches and aspens. Children shouted and splashed as they played in the water, and the rhythmic sound of country music came from a transistor radio. Vaguely aware of these sounds of summer, Jessica felt joy swell within her as she held Simon close against her, because she was going to stay to see the fall and the winter, and be there when the spring came round again. The spirits of the place had spoken to her.